

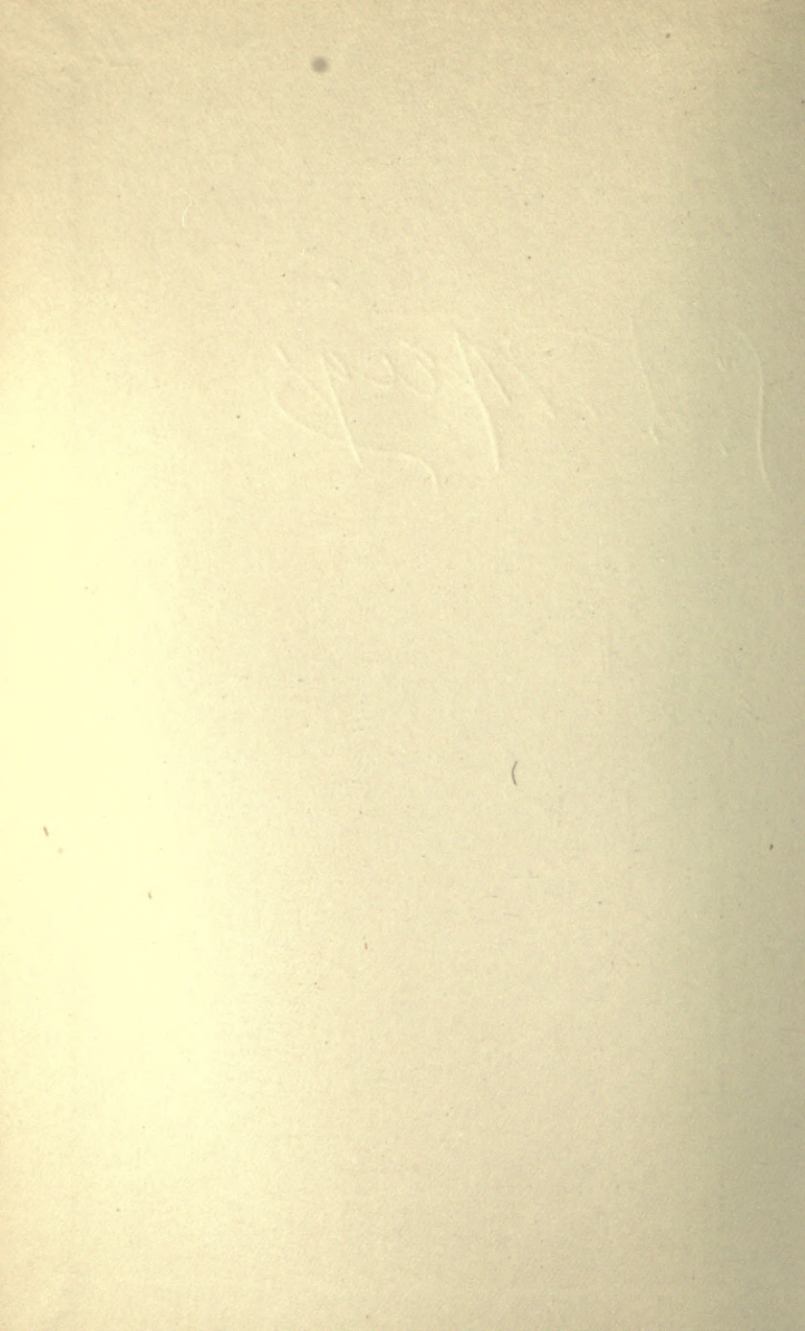


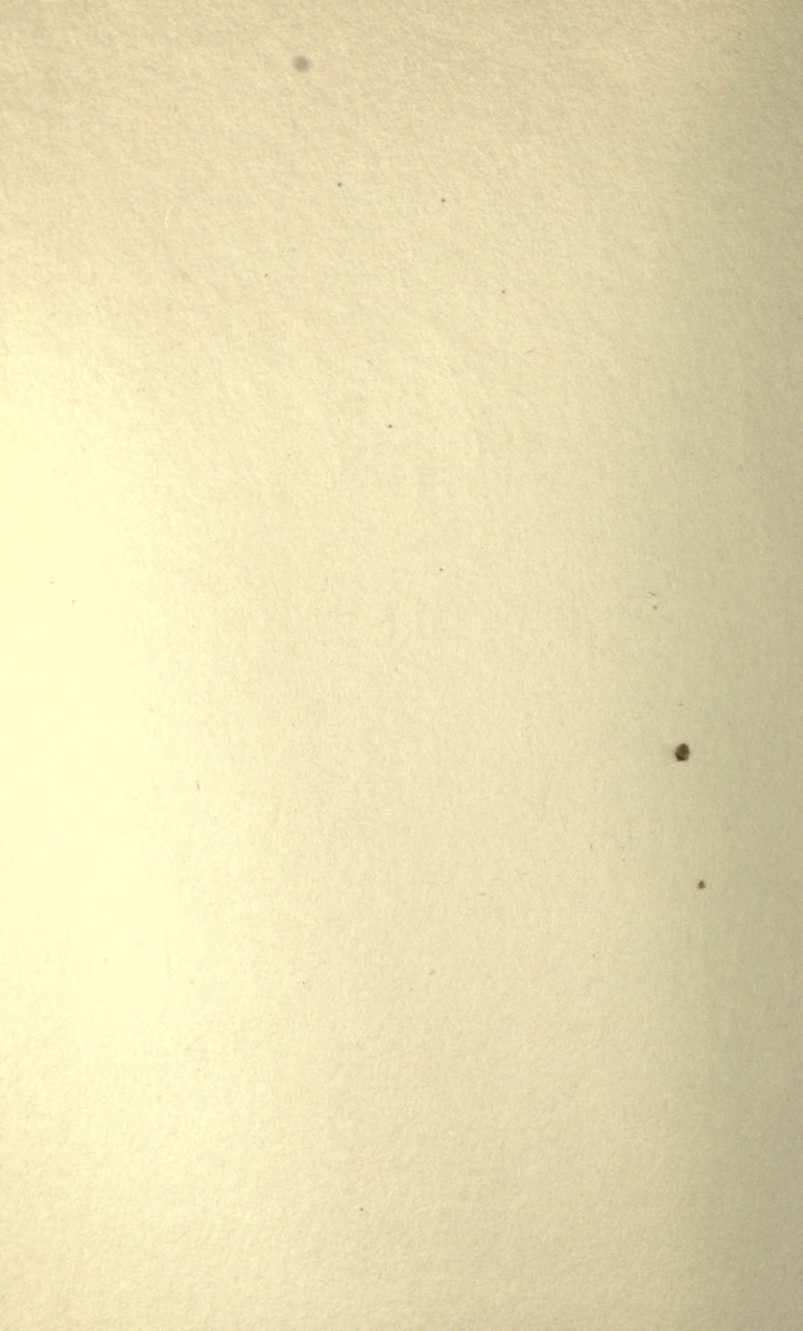
FIRST LOVE

MARIE VAN VORST



St. J. P. P. P.





FIRST LOVE





Milly

FIRST LOVE

By

MARIE VAN VORST

Author of

IN AMBUSH, MISS DESMOND
THE GIRL FROM HIS TOWN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
F. GRAHAM COOTES

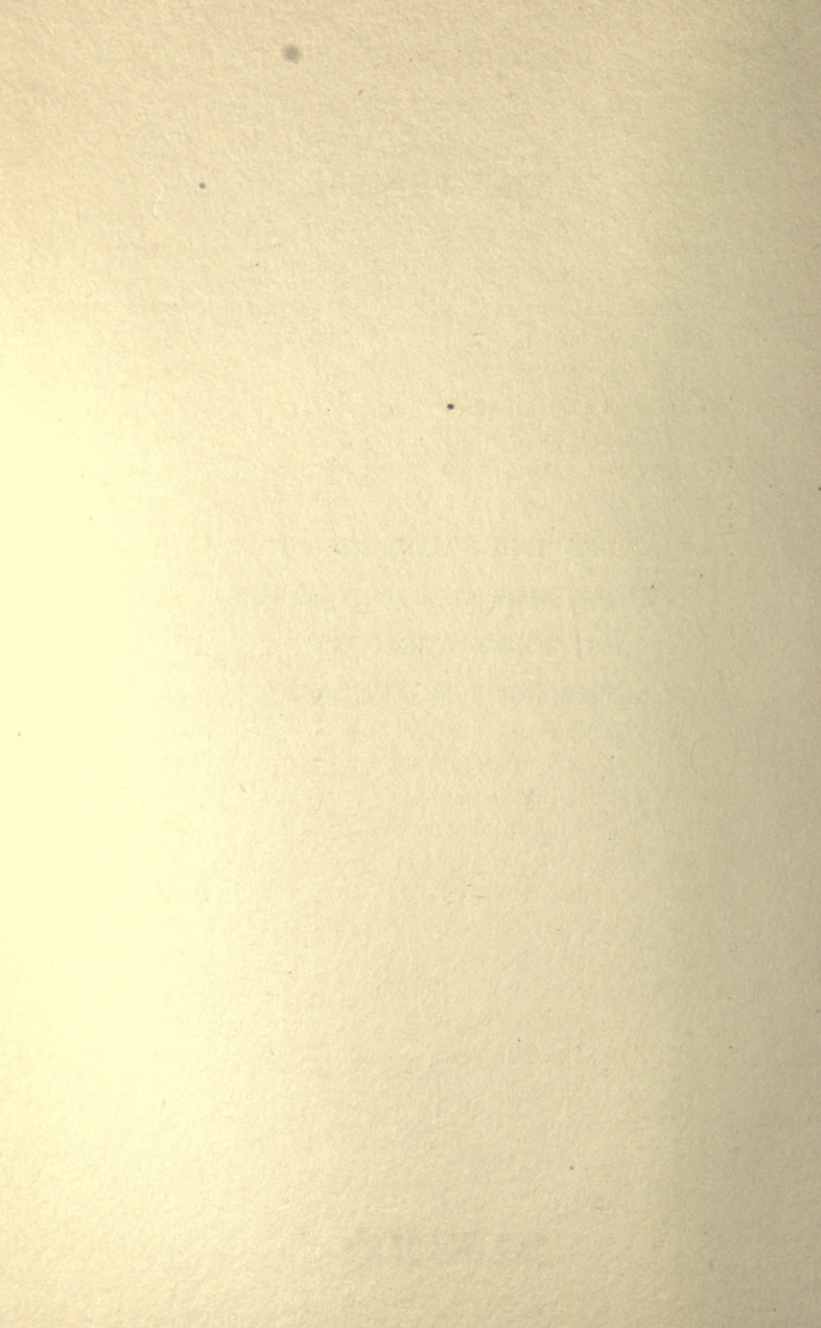
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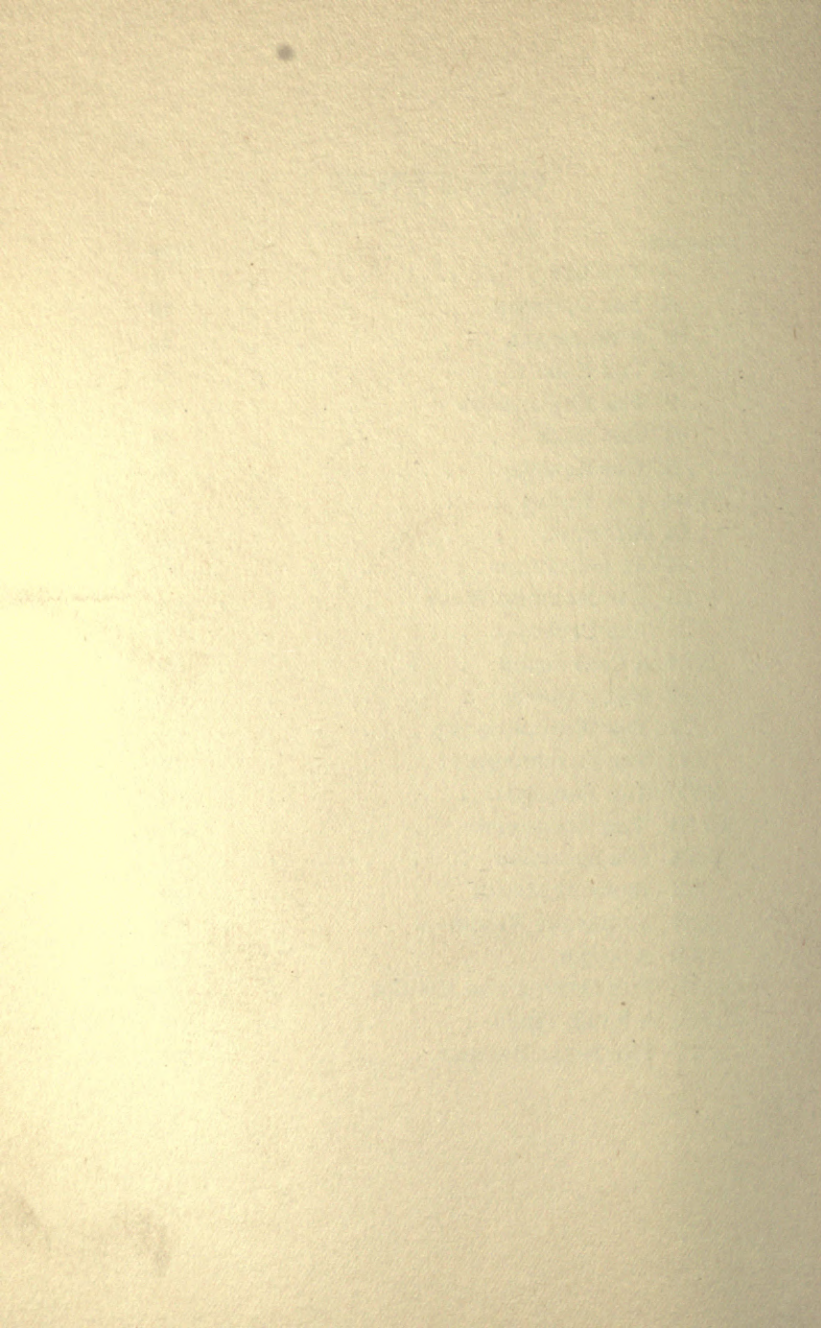
TO THE DAUGHTER OF
THE AUTHOR OF DAVID HARUM—
VIOLET WESTCOTT
THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

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FIRST LOVE

CHAPTER I

THE BOY

HE had probably never vibrated to any great extent heretofore; nor could have recorded a stronger emotion than that which thrilled him when he pulled a frog out of a pool, or succeeded in climbing "the highest tree round." Certain it is that on the fifteenth of May, 18—, his heart throbbed right enough, and he felt so deeply that the memory of his emotion left a vivid mark down through his whole life—down through his whole life.

These feelings returned many times when boy-hands were too small to hold such vastness; but they were cruel, too, and came back later, when he had learned what that memory was.

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And when the last sunsets flushed his sky, the image of her shone over him like a star.

One May afternoon John Bennett stood in the parlor of the James Street house—in his own parlor in his own house. He had been motherless since his birth, and his father had died last year; but this house was his home, and every carpet and every crack, and every spot and stain and mark John knew well. The very odors were familiar and belonged to “his house.” This Easter vacation, though there wasn’t any family for him to come home to, he had been brought back from school by a telegram, for the house was to be sold at auction, and the natives of Syracuse would be at hand to pick up the remnants of furniture, bric-à-brac and belongings, and when all the debts should be paid, if any money was left over it would be put aside for John. He supposed “the people” would tell him what he was to do. One of the “people” was Doctor Brainard, the family

THE BOY

physician; another was a real estate agent; and John Bennett wasn't clear *who* the rest of them were, and it didn't make any great difference, anyway.

The sale had been going on all day, and John hid between the parlor curtains, looking out at the little front yard where just below in the soft, muddy street the one-horse car cut its way and jingled slushingly along. John knew the car well, he had driven it; "the man had let him," and it was the most delightful fun in the world, better than ringing door-bells and running away, better than any kind of make-believe game, for he was then the real driver of a real animal, and he felt a great responsibility when he turned the little loose brake of the tram and drove the lean steady horse while the driver used to stand and chat and laugh and read the *Syracuse Times*.

Up the stone walk from the street to the house he had dashed thousands of times; on his bicycle out through the gate, down the

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broad walk to the town at the foot of the hill. Countless times he had turned into the candy shop or the soda-water fountain, where he had "treated" as long as he had a cent to spend.

Now the grass was grown high, and the dandelions scattered golden heads softly through the green. The air smelled of blossoms and of May, the day looked bright and clean. Rows of buggies, carriages, and wagons filled James Street in front of the Bennett house, and a red auction flag floated out at the gate.

Doctor Brainard had told John that there were a few valuable books, a few ornaments, and his mother's piano which he might be glad to possess; but there was no money to buy these things for the Bennett boy, and except for a desolate sense that under his feet the very world was being cut away by a blow of the auctioneer's hammer, John didn't mind. He didn't take possessions to heart, but there was just one thing he wanted. The little boy,

THE BOY

not sentimental about the furniture, had yearned for this one thing for years. Now, on the auctioneer's table, long and slender, recalling his father as did nothing else, lay the prize shot-gun awarded Mr. Bennett at the Hill Club for clay pigeon shooting, and John thought that if he saw that gun carried out of the house under his eyes he would die!

In his knickerbockers and his little plain clothes, hands in his pockets, his brow puckered and his feet planted firmly on the floor, the child stood before the holocaust of his goods and chattels and waited for the auctioneer's voice to call out this article as the others had been called, and the moment was the biggest tragedy of John's life.

Mr. Bennett, improvident, charming, talented and clever, had lived like a prince on his credit in the house in James Street. There were fine brands of champagne in the cellar; there were good cigars, already called off and appreciated; there were pistols and fencing-

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foils, masks and shields—nothing but the gentleman's personal clothes were wanting to give a note to the sale. His silver toilet articles, his canes with fantastic handles, his little collection of old snuff-boxes—all had been sold.

Near the little chap in the window Doctor Brainard—his own feelings much alive—had taken his place to watch the sale.

Doctor Brainard had been in love with Mrs. Bennett, and his sentiment was deep for the piano. John had not paid attention to the old man's absorbed face, and didn't dare ask him to buy the gun; he dared ask nothing. He had been told that the debts "were disgraceful, they heaped up high as the house," and he felt humiliated and burdened.

From where he had hidden the gun was not visible, but he knew he would hear when they should call it out, and he listened, his whole heart in his ears. He had told the fellows at school about that gun, and they had envied him, and he had dreamed of carrying

THE BOY

it, for he was a sportsman born and by inheritance. He endured whacks and bruises and hurts as all manly boys do, but he could not bear this sacrifice. His father's own prize gun! "Gosh, dang!" he said, and was sincerely profane.

He drew his sleeve across his eyes, and as he did so he saw through his tears that a new vehicle had slushed through the muddy road and stopped before the gate. From the big dog-cart, driven by an English groom, a lady descended and came quickly up the path. John knew the rig to belong to the Bathursts, and the lady to be none other than Mrs. Peter Bathurst. She wasn't important to him, and if with the crowd she had passed in earlier he would not have noticed her; but now as she sailed up the walk in her spring dress, a touch of ruffled white at the front of her bodice and the flash of flowers in her hat, she was most lovely and the boy looked at her long. There was a brightness, a gayness about her, she dif-

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ferred from the dried specimens of townsfolk filling the room.

There was also about her a freedom from the horrors of money. She didn't seem to belong to auctions, and she came in like the beams of sunlight.

The lady passed over to her friend, Doctor Brainard, and the doctor rose and gave her his place. John heard her rustle to her seat, and something that smelled like violets floated to where he stood.

"Doctor, your wire came to me up in the Valley yesterday, and I am glad you sent it. I wouldn't have missed this sale, you know, for anything."

The gentle voice was the first agreeable sound that had fallen on John's ears that day; it was a pleasant contrast to the auctioneer's tones, and "Where's the boy?" he heard her say again.

"I don't know, I'm sure; he's around here somewhere."

THE BOY

Mrs. Bathurst opened her catalogue. "I'm sorry those decanters are gone, and the coffee service; I adored the china."

"I have put aside the books for you," the doctor replied, "and—and the piano still remains. I shall buy it myself."

"I shan't overbid you," Mrs. Bathurst said sympathetically. "You may count on me."

John faced about and looked into the room, which, transfigured by disorder and filled with strangers, was dreadful to him. The home aspect had for ever disappeared, it was as impersonal and indifferent as a waiting-room in a station, a place from which now he would be glad to take some train that would carry him far away.

John heard the books called off. They were old friends. His father had taken delight and pride in showing them to his son, but John could let books go without a pang; he was an outdoor boy, a sport. Then came his mother's piano, so full of sentiment to others; but it had

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none for him, he had never seen her. The doctor bought it, and the little boy had no place in the feelings the purchase aroused.

Now it came, however—the gun!

The auctioneer drew it out of the case: there was a silver harp on the shining wood, engraved with his father's name, the name of the club, and the date of the pigeon contest. The little boy stepped from his place of hiding, his nervous hands deep in his pockets, his face scarlet above his black tie and his turnover collar. His shock of disordered hair was thick above his eyes and brow. "If I had a million dollars," he thought, "I'd give them for father's gun. *They* don't know," he said behind his set teeth, "*they don't know!*"

He looked hopefully around the room at the possible purchasers. By the door stood the minister who had baptized him. John passed him over caustically—a parson with a gun! No, *he* wouldn't buy it.

There were both friends and enemies in the

THE BOY

crowd. John owed seventy-five cents to Hickson, the candy store man. The other faces grew vague and blurred. The auctioneer was telling about the gun, its make and history. The doctor pushed his chair back; the purchase of the piano had been successful and he had no further interest in the sale. And here Mrs. Bathurst rose, and as she did so she saw John's face peering out between the curtains, his eyes fixed on the gun. He was twelve years old then, strong and muscular, straight and tall for his age; he had a manliness about him, a fire!

The bidding began. As the bids fell fast and eager, John looked from face to face, over at the doctor and then at Mrs. Bathurst. He heard her speak, he heard her speak again and again, and then the auctioneer said, in measured tones that seemed to put an end to all his longings, "Sold to Mrs. Peter Bathurst," and the boy's heart nearly stopped.

Bought by a woman! By a woman! . . .

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Like a thief he slipped from the room and crept up-stairs through the deserted house.

He crushed back his tears and his sudden despair. A little bedroom had been set apart for his occupancy, all his things had been put in there; but as John rushed into this refuge and slammed the door behind him, he saw that other things, too, had been hastily thrown in pell-mell—his father's clothes. Topmost on John's bed were the corduroy shooting-coat and breeches. He flung himself down and buried his face in the garments, which still seemed to smell of the woods. A dread of being heard kept him silent in his crying; he was no baby, anyhow, but he couldn't help this outburst. "Gosh!" he repeated, "it's *too* mean, *too* mean. A woman with that bully gun!"

He heard voices and then steps on the stairs. In another moment some one had dared to open his door on him with the indiscretion which grown-ups display toward childhood.

"Here he is!" proclaimed the "darn doctor

THE BOY

fool," as the boy termed him. Then the doctor stood aside and Mrs. Bathurst took his place.

"John! . . . John, may I come in a minute?"

He grumbled he "guessed so," and she came in and sat down on the bed near the corduroy clothes. He thought her quite an old woman—she was then about twenty-five.

"I have been talking to the doctor about things," she smiled, her eyes all crinkled up into little curves that seemed to run over her face. She wore a spick-and-span dress, and one hand lay on the bed, very white against the brown of the corduroy hunting clothes.

"I have two boys, you know, at my house—my stepsons, little Peter and Jack. We are at the Valley, and there is lots of riding and sport there. I'd *love* to have you come home with me for the rest of the holidays. Will you? I am going back at once, and the boys will be so glad to see you."

The "people" hadn't told him where he was

FIRST LOVE

to stop, even for the night, and he cast a desperate glance at the uninviting bed and desolate little room, where his own valise lay agape on a chair.

But, absorbed as he was in his own affairs, the grace of Mrs. Bathurst's welcome touched the boy. She was so much prettier near to, she was so softly bright, and her eyes were leaf-brown. She was nodding and smiling, and she didn't "grab" him and stroke his hair, she only sat with one white hand on the hunting coat and one holding her handkerchief in her lap, looking up at him with those lovely eyes. In the language of his rough slang he said to himself, "She's a corker! She's a corker!"

Then his resentment arose. He'd forgotten—

Continuing to smile ravishingly, even flirting unconsciously with this very young man, drawing him with her tenderness and with that womanliness that speaks to the most youthful

THE BOY

masculine heart, Mrs. Bathurst was making him her victim.

"I was so glad I came in time to-day, John. I bought your father's gun for you. I bought the set of china, too, and the silver. I want you to know it now so you will feel you have some possessions. I bought the prize gun. I have so often seen your father pass my house with it on his shoulder. It's yours now."

The color left his face where the tears had made stains over the freckles and tan. He wanted to say, "I'll buy it back when I'm rich," but it didn't seem exactly polite, and he had no thanks at command. Indeed, he could not find anything to say, a crop of frogs seemed to jump in his throat. Rather than cry before a woman he would have been flayed alive; he stared at her desperately, rather angrily; his blue eyes on her brown ones. But he could tell through the blur that she was still smiling.

Virginia Bathurst was clever as well as merciful. "So if you'll just pack up those things,

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John, in your bag, we will carry them down to the dog-cart."

He had not escaped or refused her invitation, but he had fallen madly in love.

After the twelve-mile drive and a regular "party dinner," beginning with clams and ending with ice-cream; after a rough-and-tumble fight with the Bathurst boys in the hall of the big old-fashioned house, John went at bedtime to his own room, and there in the corner, in its canvas bag, stood his father's gun. The shock of the sight of it, suddenly become his very own, taught him how to express gratitude. He went directly out into the hall, intending to go down-stairs and thank Mrs. Bathurst. He got no farther than the head of the staircase. He had not seen his friend since early that afternoon, for the boys had eaten their supper alone.

She had come up the flight of stairs, and now stood on the top step in a white dress, her

THE BOY

neck and arms bare to his young eyes. Her husband was following, smoking his cigar.

"Why, *John!*" she exclaimed in surprise, "not in bed yet?"

He put one small rough hand out desperately. "I was just going," he stammered, "when—when—"

A boy would rather say anything else in the world than "thank you." In his rough, simple code, politeness is a sign of weakness and girl-ishness.

"I wanted to say," he stammered hoarsely, "about that gun. Well, *it's all right . . .*" he ended determinedly, and Mrs. Bathurst nodded back at him; she understood. She was as kind as she was beautiful.

"Why, *of course* it's all right!" she accepted cordially. "Good night, John."

CHAPTER II

THE DECISION

THE "people" managed to get sufficient out of the sale to pay up the biggest of the bugbear debts and when school opened after the holidays John's return to Exeter was taken for granted. The day before he went back, Doctor Brainard, of the piano romance, was surprised by a sudden and unannounced visit from the boy.

"See here!" John Bennett blurted out. "Who's sending me to school, anyway?"

"Why, John—" the doctor began.

"Is *she*?"

Doctor Brainard had another "she" in his mind, and was puzzled.

"Whom do you mean?"

"There's a ticket up in the cigar store

THE DECISION

window. It says, 'Boy wanted.' I'd rather go and apply."

The doctor pointed to a chair vacated by the last patient.

"Sit down."

But John preferred standing, his blue and yellow jockey cap, striped by the school colors, crushed up in his hand.

"A man can't get very far these days without an education," said the doctor. "It's too soon to take you out of school. We talked it over, and it seemed wisest for you to go back to Exeter. As for working in a cigar store . . ."

Mr. Bennett had been the "elegant" of Syracuse, the most learned, delightful man in town—spendthrift, prodigal, kind and improvident—he had spent as he liked, played, hunted, and ridden, and when the hard corners had at last threatened to harm him too cruelly, he had gone out of the world with no unkind feelings to any one in it.

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"My boy," went on the doctor, "if your father were living he would send you to school at no matter what sacrifice. He was a Harvard man, and I know that he would want you to go to Cambridge."

John frowned, a way he had when he was touched. He asked with effort:

"I didn't think there'd be enough money?"

Doctor Brainard hesitated just here to tell the lie that, if he told it quickly enough, would have reconciled the boy. John saw that he was being sent by some one. He opened his polo cap and smoothed it out.

"All right," he said obstinately, "I'm going to ask Hickson to let me be an errand boy."

The doctor thought he saw an indolence in this attitude, and that John would rather play than work at his books.

"Nonsense! Rubbish! You'll disgrace your mother's name—disgrace your family!" he added.

"Well, I'm not going to let *her* send me to

THE DECISION

school!" John said sullenly, and the doctor knew then whom he meant.

"Do you mean Mrs. Bathurst? Whatever put that into your head?"

John's call was between patients' visits, and a nervous cough from the ante-chamber penetrated the doors.

"Come, come," said the doctor impatiently, "Mrs. Bathurst knows nothing of it whatever. She's never thought of sending you to school, and there's no reason why she should."

"Who is?" John asked more temperately, and with sudden shame and relief.

"Why, I happen to be doing so," said his friend shortly, "and you can thank me by studying well and getting along in your class. That's all right, John." He was pushing the small figure toward the door and ringing his bell at the same time.

"I'd a great deal rather work here in a store," the boy urged hopelessly.

"Come, come," said his friend in dismissal,

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“you can’t work in village stores, you know, and you’re to go back to-night, aren’t you? Well, we’ll talk things over at dinner,” and John was pushed out as the next invalid crept in with his coughs, and fits, and abnormalities, and valetudinarianisms, while the healthy little boy, with nothing more than the shame of poverty and a single burden of debt for which he felt responsible, heard the consulting-room door shut on him.

John went to Exeter that night from the doctor’s house, and didn’t suggest store-keeping again, but began from then on to take life and education and what pleasures he could pick up as a matter of course, and his vacations were full of visits to the doctor’s house, where the smells of acids and medicines, as the door opened to let him in on his brief holidays, became connected with his returns to all he knew now of home.

CHAPTER III

A WINDFALL

HIS school-days went by, bland, irresponsible, with the bluff rigors of winter and its rude sports, with the warm effulgence of summer and its outdoor things. In his vacations he visited his schoolmates, or more usually he went up to Doctor Brainard's farm, and lived like a country-man in the hayfields, in the barns and lofts. He didn't injure himself studying, but learned without trouble, stood well in his class, and was the best boxer of his set and a prime shot.

The years turned him out a big, clear-eyed fellow, with a thick crop of hair, which his enemies called red, and a fine face, full of life and light.

Before he passed his preliminaries for college a windfall blew something his way. Fate

FIRST LOVE

shook a tree that grows in her garden, and John Bennett, standing under the tree, came in for the fall. A pile of securities, shares in an Oklahoma mine, were gathered up out of the safe-deposit box by Doctor Brainard and sold one day. John Bennett learned a little later that he needn't go through college, thanks to anybody but his own father, for he had for life a little competence, a little income that could keep him like a gentleman.

He had been playing foot-ball one November afternoon, and was coming across the fields toward the buildings, his arms across the shoulders of his two chums. All three fellows were singing aloud. He had been sent for to see Doctor Brainard, who had run out from Boston to take a look at his ward. John scorned *convenances*, and had gone into the parlor as he was, his baggy trousers green-stained at the knees, his hair as ragged and disturbed as a wheatfield in a breeze, his cheeks bright with cold and exercise. There was nothing about

A WINDFALL

him to suggest that he had been having the blues; as sincerely as a healthy boy can worry, he *had* worried. He was in debt—he owed a jolly sum for a boy—and it bothered him beyond words. He owed at the florist's a little bill of thirty dollars, and at the tailor's something like a hundred, and in his life he had never clinked together at one time the cash of more than a ten-dollar bill. The year before he had fallen in love with a girl in Boston. A pair of blue eyes, a tilt of the head, a mixture of prettiness and impertinence bowled John over, and he had wooed his sweetheart well. His very limited wardrobe, bought for the most part by Doctor Brainard at department stores, “made him sick,” and he had ordered decent clothes from the best tailor in Boston; and, stimulated by the color of the girl's blue eyes, he had sent her violets and other flowers, only stopping when he realized that she did not really care a pin about him.

The Christmas holidays were near at hand,

FIRST LOVE

and he had laid his plans for putting the case to Doctor Brainard when he should go home. There was nothing of the coward about the big, mature boy, who, young as he was, looked the man, and who, young as he was, had the temperament and ardor that might turn him so strongly for good or ill.

But there was in him nothing of the weakness that had made his father a prodigal, irresponsible spendthrift, and John had planned a noble solution of his problems to present to Doctor Brainard.

"I'll go to Cambridge, just the same," he had intended saying to his guardian, "only I'll work there in some way or other—tutor, or something, I don't know what they do—until I've paid up what I owe in Boston; that is, I mean to say, if you'll advance me the little money I shall need to enter Harvard; or, if you'd rather, I'll work right here in Syracuse, I'll do that."

He had thought it out in a dozen ways, but

A WINDFALL

this seemed the best. Never having owed a cent in his life or realized any kind of responsibility, these first debts had to him a horror and a shame. No unexpected stranger arrived at the school during the last month, but John thought he might be a collector from the tailor's, or something more appalling than a gardener from the florist's, and it kept him in a flutter.

But he was sure there was some way out of it, and when he learned that Doctor Brainard was really within the school walls there was a sense of relief that he should have it all out with him now, before the holidays. Doctor Brainard was the only person who stood to him in the way of guide or friend. There was no father to bullyrag about his indiscretions, no mother to weep about them; and these weren't, after all, gambling debts, they were nothing but debts of folly because he had made a fool of himself about a girl.

Violets and good clothes had not won Milly

FIRST LOVE

Haven, and John had come out of the experience damaged a little, for the young creature had flirted dreadfully with him, she had given him the mitten before the whole school. A college man had come along, a fellow old enough to be her . . . brother, and John Bennett wasn't in it any more. But his debts were with him. He owed a hundred and thirty dollars, and his allowance at this time was about forty cents a week!

He had pondered over these things on his unhappy pillow many times before healthy sleep carried him off to the peaceful fields beyond all care.

Bennett went in as he was to the library, where Doctor Brainard stood ruminating before a plaster cast of a boy's head and shoulders on a pedestal by the window. The doctor had been studying with interest this work of art. It was idealized, but there was a curve of the cheek, a turn of the temple, a touch of the line of the ear that recalled to him the days

A WINDFALL

whose memories had made him purchase Mrs. Bennett's piano at the spring sale.

"Why, isn't this a bust of *you*, John?" he asked, as the big foot-ball half-back came into the room.

"Yes," returned the young man shortly; "rot, isn't it, to have it here? I'll smash it up some day, when I get the chance."

"It's an excellent likeness, an excellent likeness!"

He shook his ward by the hand with unusual warmth.

"It looks like your mother."

John did not say that the art professor had asked leave to cast this head as the most perfect head of youth that he had ever seen. Doctor Brainard said:

"You were having a game, weren't you?"

"Just coming in." John reflected: "He looks too bright for me to tell him now; I guess I'll wait till I get to Syracuse at Christmas."

The two sat down together in the window,

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where, without, they could see the fellows coming in from different parts of the ground, over which a light fall of snow had left a fine powder. Doctor Brainard glanced at the white, lifeless representation of the boy's warm, live, young face.

"I've come to tell you a little piece of news, John."

A little bit of news like this, if it had been brought to Doctor Brainard when he was a boy at school; if he had possessed the income he was about to announce to John, he might have married the woman whose lineaments he could now trace in her son. In which case there wouldn't have been any John Bennett. The doctor was getting muddled.

"Peter Bathurst has asked me to go up to the Adirondacks with him for the Christmas holidays. I think I'd rather like to go if you think—" John stopped.

"You mean, if I think you can afford it?"

"Yes, that's it," John nodded.

A WINDFALL

The doctor sat back and looked at him kindly.

"Your father took some shares in a mine in 18—. He was the only man in Syracuse that did so. When he failed the stock couldn't be sold for two dollars a share, and he bought it somewhere around twenty-five."

John listened; he had heard so many attacks on that dear memory—on his father's extravagance and prodigality. He loved his recollections of the gallant gentleman, to whom money was a commodity and not a thing of importance, and which he could no more make or hoard than he could have made or hoarded the air. He frowned here with some expectation of an attack.

"Yesterday," the doctor went on, "I sold the stock out at two hundred. There are a few old debts which you will want to pay, although they are outlawed. This transaction makes you worth about fifty thousand dollars."

John smiled.

FIRST LOVE

"Gosh!" he said under his breath, and struck his pockets to feel for the bills which, like love-letters, had clung to him for months.

"I shall invest it for you in government bonds and mortgages, and in the four years before your majority I hope I shall have added to your capital."

"Then," the boy spoke with what unconcern he could, "might I have a little money now?"

Doctor Brainard had been prepared for this demand.

"I brought up a little for you, and you can go with Peter Bathurst to the woods if you like."

"Oh, it's all right about *that*," returned the heir impatiently. "All I want is a little cash."

"How much?"

"Oh, about two hundred dollars."

His friend started. "I've brought twenty-five dollars with me," he said severely. "It's more than you have ever had at one time, and

A WINDFALL

you'll have to get along with that for the present."

And Bennett, who had come into a little fortune, and who had laid all manner of noble plans about working out his college education, accepted the roll of bills which the doctor put into his hand without further protest. And when the old gentleman had taken his leave, Bennett found himself gloomily staring out into the November night, very little richer than he had been before, and with his debts still hanging like Damocles' sword over his head.

CHAPTER IV

THE LADY

THERE is no more lovely part of New York state than a certain wide valley with its sweeping fields, its gentle incline, its harvesting meadows, and hunting country, and as such it is appreciated to the utmost, and its landscape is splashed with scarlet coats, its echoes roused by the horn, its furrows, ditches, and hedges shot over by horse and hound from the first of the season to its close. There is the worship and cult for the horse in Tallahoe Valley, and in this age of locomotion by steam and rail it is a pleasure to find oneself in a region where horse-flesh is cultivated, and where the motor may not pass under penalty of the law.

There are fine old houses hereabouts, and fine new houses, and the atmosphere is English

THE LADY

in its pastoral and sporting character, and in its entertainments. Among other properties the Bathurst place is colonial, and stands proudly on a little hill with something like six hundred acres of farm and pasture land around it.

Mrs. Bathurst sat in her dressing-room before the window which gives to the west. The October morning promised rain. Above the trees she could see the gray skies, across whose threatening face drifted a few clouds, their edges rimmed with gold. The house was full of young people, her sons' college friends and two or three strikingly pretty creatures whom she had asked from Washington "to form her stepsons' taste," as she had said, writing to her Washington chum, when inviting the *débutante* of the past season, Cynthia Forsythe, to come to Tallahoe for the horse show.

They had arrived the day before, and the

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hostess had barely seen them, for from the time of their arrival they had been either in the saddle or driving, or tramping short ten-mile jaunts, as is the fashion of the Valley.

In the loveliness of the Valley in October the lady's enthusiasm for her native state returned. She had unpacked her trunks and made the tour of her house only three days before. She had seen from every window the framed pictures of lawn and forests, and, above all, after a tour of her stables, her approval reached its height, and a ride across country on her favorite mare capped the climax.

She had been in Europe twelve years, and had not realized how American she really was, or how she loved her state, until now, with its brisk air beating her cheeks, the spice and perfume of the autumn in the wind, and the vague scent of the forest fires.

As she sat before her window her husband entered in his riding clothes, his crop in his hand, his white stock rumpled, his face red as

THE LADY

a convolvulus. Peter Bathurst, Senior, had the air of an upper groom; his boots were not over-clean, and he brought an odor of the stables with him.

"It's a bang-up show," he told his wife, taking a paper out of his pocket. "In this fourth class, for instance, where Ladybird is entered, it's a toss-up who will get the ribbon; and I've never seen finer horses in my life, not even in Ireland."

"Who's to ride Ladybird, after all?" asked Mrs. Bathurst.

"That Bennett chap."

"But he hasn't come, I thought."

"Oh, he's been here since early morning," said her husband curtly. "If you shut yourself up here for hours, Virginia—if you fetch your continental custom of eating in bed and dawdling about till noon in America—why, you'll miss half the show. And if you play the off-stander like this the people here will think you're giving yourself airs."

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"Off-stander!" she echoed, remembering how her heart had thrilled to every inch of home. "I've been really tired out from my long ride yesterday, Peter. It's a century, you know, since I've been on a horse."

"You didn't look like a tenderfoot!" He grudgingly remembered how she had regained her seat in a trice, like the good horsewoman she was. "You'll hold your own, all right, even with these girls. I think if one of them giggles again I'll curse! Come on down-stairs, won't you? We'll want something to drink before we start."

His wife gave a lingering look at the landscape and left her lounge.

"I think I'll dress first, then I shan't need to come up again."

"What's the matter with you as you are, for Heaven's sake?"

"Will I do?"

He laughed harshly.

"Where do you think you are? At Long-

THE LADY

champs or Ascot? Don't you remember the Valley horse show?"

For answer she picked up a hat which, with its veil, lay on a table at her side, and pinned both on as she stood. She took as well a pair of long chamois gloves, drawing them between her hands.

"Come," she said quietly, "I am quite ready to go down." And her husband went before her, muttering something about woman's eternal vanity and waste of time.

The giggle which had offended Bathurst broke silver-like from the group at the end of the big room into which, preceded by her husband, the lady of the house entered.

There was much beauty in the little group. Cynthia Forsythe had made a sensation in Washington the year before, and her two friends were charming seconds.

Peter and Jack Bathurst, in riding clothes, lingered about the group, admiring the flowers of these young faces, like gardeners waiting

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to choose before culling the roses, already connoisseurs of the types they each preferred.

"Mrs. Bathurst!" one of the girls cried. "I'm so glad your head is better and that you are coming, and I hope Ladybird will win everything!"

Cynthia Forsythe, the daughter of her dearest friend, had been in Mrs. Bathurst's mind for her eldest stepson. The Washington débutante turned adoring eyes on the older woman, the eyes of frank youth willing to admire without stint until a man comes along to awaken jealousy. She put her arm about Mrs. Bathurst's waist.

"How sweet you look!" she murmured. "And what a darling dress!"

Mr. Bathurst grinned. "Yes, she was going to change it if I hadn't put my foot down. I believe she changes her dresses every hour. She used to in Paris, at any rate."

Miss Forsythe looked at her host with disapproval, and said sharply:

THE LADY

"Well, I'm sure each dress has been prettier than the last."

"Where is Mr. John Bennett?" asked the hostess of her stepsons.

"Down at the show. He's crazy about Lady-bird, he says she has a walk-over."

Mrs. Bathurst smiled. "I hope he's right. It's really too bad Peter can't ride the mare himself."

"And why doesn't he?" asked Miss Forsythe.

"Game leg or foot," answered Jack indifferently. "And father could no more ride straight in a show than he could ride crooked out of it. Nervous."

"And is your friend nervous?" Mrs. Bathurst asked, and Jack roared.

"John! He's got iron nerves, and if any one can pull the mare through, he can."

Bathurst, who had left the room, here put his head in at the door.

"It's raining, and the traps are all here. If

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nobody's going on to the show, I shall send them back to the stables."

Mrs. Bathurst found herself in the buck-board with Cynthia Forsythe.

"How do you like this happy-go-lucky sporting country, Cynn timer?"

"I love it!"

"So do I, every tree and blade and rod of it!"

"You've been away so long!"

"Yes, but it's all the better to come back to now."

Cynthia Forsythe was thinking to herself:

"How can she find anything nice either here or in Europe with that brute of a husband?"

Her mother had warned her, but the big, red-faced man, with his rude remarks before company, and his covert attempts to kiss her and take her hand, was worse than she had feared. Cynthia, who had not turned nineteen, thought to herself, "How beautiful Mrs. Bathurst must have been when she was young!"

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Young, poor dear! The girl couldn't measure the power of ripe beauty by her side, in comparison with which her own frail charms were like the unmellow promise of early fruit, and sure to be sharp to the taste.

"Mr. Bennett told me that he had been here once when he was a little boy," she said. "He remembers every stick and stone. You haven't seen him yet, have you?"

"No; he came after I had gone up-stairs."

"He's perfectly fascinating!" the girl said enthusiastically. "Such a good-looking, charming fellow. I do hope he'll get the ribbon."

"I do hope," said Mrs. Bathurst, "that he will keep Ladybird's head up at the hurdles, for she has a lot of horrid tricks which one would never suspect; and if John Bennett lets her graze the wood, I pity him with my husband!"

"Stop here!" she directed her coachman. "It's as good a position as we'll be likely to find, late as we are."

CHAPTER V

THE HORSE SHOW

MRS. BATHURST found the scene around her agreeable, gay, and charming. There was a simplicity, an easy-going content in the Valley people, and in their enjoyment of their annual show. Every one was in the best of humor. Glancing from face to face, remarking those people with whom she had been bred and associated, and who had changed so from those early days, knowing their scandals and their tragedies, and the worldliness of their lives, she saw their good spirits and their animation and their composure and philosophical acceptance of life in this conventional front which they presented to the world. The sun had decided to shine, and the turf, enclosed by its rope fencing, was soft and

THE HORSE SHOW

green. The villagers crowded down to it; line after line of vehicles covered the fields, and wheels and covered carriages, ponies and hacks, buckboards, drags and rockaways crowded the meadows.

The pride of the state was there in first-rate specimens of horse-flesh, and in the shape of good-looking men and women. The scene was not foreign in the least, it was purely American, with just a touch of cosmopolitanism to keep it from provincialism. Everything looked delightful to Mrs. Bathurst. She felt a warm liking for her own country-people; the air, crisp and fragrant, as it came up from the sod and from across the meadows, did her good with its fresh vigor.

She regarded with satisfaction her acquaintances, nodding and waving to them; she sat up straight and well on the seat of her little carriage, her arm along the back, and her head on her hand. She couldn't say she felt young again, for she had never felt old or indifferent.

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Indeed, she felt buoyant, and as nearly happy as possible under the circumstances. She went over, heart and soul, to the Valley, to old times and old scenes, to the new ones, and twelve years of foreign existence, their weary experiences, their tides, their gaiety and balls, their fêtes that had pushed and pulled her along—filled in, filled up—demanded much and given little in exchange, faded and wore away. The years she measured had claimed a great deal of her soul—all was shut away from her now by the effect that home and her own country had made on her, and her eyes, smiling and cordial, were clear as the afternoon, which finally shone on the scene.

Her husband, many of whose horses were in the show, was down by the judges' stand. But she did not linger in her observation of his figure long. Her stepsons were both riding and driving in the different entries, and were off with the grooms at the far end of the field. The class of four-year-old hunters had just

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come on, and she consulted her catalogue to see if every one had qualified.

She was not to be permitted to view the scene alone for very long. People called to her and beckoned from the other carriages, and, coming toward her as quickly as he could make his way through the crowd, she saw a man whom she had known all her life, and who she knew would not let her leave his side again so long as she remained in the field. The gentleman had left his place on his coach, and even from a distance Mrs. Bathurst could see the pleasure on his face at sight of her. She sighed, changed her position, and when he came up she had lost something of her superabundant gaiety.

“By Jove!” he said, greeting her, standing by her wheel. “I came up from Albany yesterday to the show, but I had no idea it would be as good as this, you know.”

“You think the average is fair?”

“Confound the horses! I think it’s the most

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wonderful sight to see *you* again; but it's twelve years, my dear woman!"

"I believe it is."

"I *know*. I have counted," he said meaningly. "And I've heard, too, of your goings-on in foreign parts. You had something like a jubilee."

She looked above him at the clear sky and over the gay crowd.

"This is a jubilee," she said. "I assure you it is the nicest thing I've done or seen in twelve years."

Nicholas Pyrnne was in congress. He loved his own country, and he exclaimed with real pleasure:

"Honestly, do you mean that? Aren't you expatriated yet?"

"I feel as though I had never been farther than Buffalo."

"Jolly! But you were always gracious, Virginia. I guess you're laughing at us."

He leaned toward her, and, quite indifferent

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as to how marked his interest might appear, "You don't know how fine it sounds," he whispered, "to hear you speak again. It's like music! Something must call you up here in the state, though?" His scrutiny was curious.

But she returned his look quietly with clear eyes.

"The whole thing calls me."

"But how about Monte Carlo, and Paris, and Homburg?"

She shook her head.

"Tallahoe and the annual horse-show—nothing else."

"But just think of the Grand Prix or the Derby."

"I don't want to," she replied. "I don't wish to think of anything but the Valley."

"Bully!" he breathed in ecstasy. "Bully! You look, Virginia—"

But here she put her hand up preventingly.

"You'll spoil everything if you make it personal. Tell me," she pursued, leaning forward

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and searching the crowd, "where is the man who is to ride Peter's Ladybird?"

"I don't know," said the Honorable Nicholas. "I thought Peter was to ride his own horse."

"He has both gout and nerves," said his wife. "One of the boys' friends, John Bennett, is to take Ladybird around."

"Bennett," Pynne asked, "the son of poor Fred Bennett of Syracuse?"

"Yes."

"Well, if he has his father's ill-luck, poor chap, he'll come a cropper, all right. It was enough for Fred to look at a scheme to have it go to bits the next day, I remember."

"When I saw him last," Mrs. Bathurst said, "I mean the boy, he was in knickerbockers—he had red hair. He spent a Sunday over here in the Valley."

"There's Peter! That's his horse!" Pynne indicated. "If the other horses in this class are as good as Bathurst's mare, it's a pretty



"Why, he's a man, a magnificent man!" Page 51

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good show all around. There!" he went on, "that must be your friend standing by Bathurst. Knickerbockers and red hair, he hasn't changed."

Mrs. Bathurst followed his indications and saw the giant in his breeches and riding-boots.

"Heavens!" she exclaimed. "If they have all grown like that, Nick, what have I changed to? Why, he's a man, a magnificent man!"

She put her lorgnon up, though she didn't need it.

"Twelve years work all kinds of tricks," Nicholas Pynne said comfortingly. "I've grown fat and turned forty."

"Oh, hush," she said; "hush!"

"And you," he continued, lowering his voice, "have grown—"

But here Mrs. Bathurst called to the girl who had come toward her carriage.

"Cynthia, get in here, will you? This is Mr. Nicholas Pynne—Miss Forsythe of Washington. I think you knew her mother—

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Cynthia Fielding. I want you all to rally around me while Ladybird runs for the Valley Cup."

CHAPTER VI

THE RACE

BENNETT knew that he had more or less of a thankless task to perform in riding Ladybird for her choleric owner. If she won anything at all it would be thanks to the horse; and if she didn't get a mention it would as naturally be his fault. Bathurst had been charming to the young man when he arrived that morning, late by twenty-four hours, on account of a railway wreck at Buffalo; and nothing of the host's sharp manner to his sons, rudeness to the servants, were reflected in his attitude toward the young college man, although these things bore out Bathurst's reputation for being a vulgar tartar.

Mrs. Bathurst he had not seen at all. The woman who had charmed his boy eyes, who

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had given him such pretty proof of heart and understanding, had become a dream to John. She was a memory he shrank from, because it meant that he must recall with poignant ache the auction day and the accompanying horrors which even the fact of his brief holiday at Bathurst House, his father's rifle, and her kindness could not make him forget.

He had had his own affairs, and they had followed one on another with amazing rapidity. Since little Milly, there had been other blue eyes, other beauties, and John discovered himself to be a fickle lover, restless in his courtships and too volatile and easily turned to a new beauty. But during the past two years he had been fancy free, calling himself already a cynic, aping the older men, developing a difficult taste, and thinking himself a misogynist. Of course, it only made him perfectly fascinating, as Cynthia Forsythe had said, and John was in danger of being well spoiled, if it had not been for his sports—his riding, shooting,

THE RACE

the outdoor life in which he reveled. The fresh air, the breeze, the exercise and the skill were the making of him mentally and physically, and for just the right period of his youth turned his thoughts away from woman and toward nature for a time; the gentler sex was out of his thoughts. Here at Bathurst House the beautiful mare, Ladybird, interested him more than Cynthia Forsythe with her laugh, which Bathurst called a silly giggle; and John had not even looked toward the other girls in the party.

Back of the line of fine old elms that bordered the village street in Tallahoe, the Big Tree Inn nestled white, with its green blinds, small window-panes, and hospitable doors. John had put up there, for the Bathursts' house was full, and he had been rather glad of the fact, because he had greater independence; and really, as he said to himself, he didn't want to bother with the girls. Back here in the Valley, after twelve years, everything came to him like

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an old experience. The drive over from the station to the house had been shorter than he recalled, for then they had seemed to drive for ever through the spring night in the tall cart. The forest, the lanes, and the big snowy frontage of the pillared house were all smaller, for it had seemed to John then like a castle set in an enchanted wood. And Mrs. Bathurst—well, he couldn't remember quite how she looked.

As John stood down by Ladybird on the show grounds—Mr. Bathurst, Peter, and Jack rowing and going on—Peter, with his blue ribbon won for roadsters on his lapel, John Bennett felt that in riding Ladybird he was going to do a stroke for the family. Neither of the sons of the house had been allowed to ride Bathurst's favorite mare, and the sole and only reason that John came in for this distinction was because the year before Bathurst had seen him ride at Syracuse in the state fair. John had made a peerless record with his own colt, and

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had won himself some distinction as a rider and owner.

He felt a great responsibility and pride about the whole thing, he had never had a family that he could remember himself; now Peter and Jack and the old man, as they called their father, and some indistinct idea of a lady, made a little household for him, and he was representing it. He got into his saddle, felt the fine supple body of the mare between his knees, led her gently off the tender grass, and the pride of his next few minutes and what he thought would be his sure success sent his young blood sparkling through his veins like wine.

"That's our trap over there," Peter Bathurst told him, "there by the yellow coach." And John glanced to see that it had the effect of being full of flowers; but he only recognized Cynthia Forsythe, and not the taller figure by her side.

When he took Ladybird around the course she came her five hurdles like the bird she was,

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lightly, and, following a gelding, she seemed especially featherweight and made out of the air. It was a foregone conclusion, John felt it. So did the others who watched him—the spectators, and the judges, and Peter Bathurst, as, legs well apart, hands in his pockets, an unlit cigar between his teeth, he stood smiling with nervous assurance, and thinking how much he would like that big blond jockey for his son.

John, “riding for his family” as a whim made him call them, passed Ladybird’s owner like thistledown, passed the judges as well, who were absorbed in their anxiety to be perfectly unprejudiced before the sight of such splendid style and strain, and such an exhibition of horse-flesh, and such an exhibition of riding. John, riding for his family, as he passed them all, swallowed the golden draft of success, with flushed cheeks and kindling eyes, and the last time round he glanced in the direction the Bathurst boys had indicated, and saw Mrs. Peter Bathurst standing up in the trap. He

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saw her in that brief second between the hurdles, she was looking at him. He remembered then how she used to look. The memory was strong. Never having admitted the thought of her, in his naïve innocence, how was he to know, as he should draw the latch, the great emotion would rush on him and bear him down?

With that one quick sight of the lady, caught between hurdles, with the wave of her hand at him and her "brava!" he knew that he was riding for *her*, for the lady herself. The blood rushed from his heart to his cheeks, his breast gave a big throb, he reached the hurdle unprepared for it, because, sportsman that he was, he had never gone into any field with a tormenting thought of a woman in his mind, and the sudden commotion communicated itself to the sensitive Ladybird. Bennett thought she was going to refuse the hurdle, and he sickened, but no! she rose for it, then retrieved, if one may so say, seemed to strike it with all

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fours, foundered, got tangled up, lost her perfect method, lost herself and fell; and John fell with her, and the hurdle, and the horse and the earth all struck him and poured themselves over him. But even before he lost his senses, shame poured over him blackest and deadliest of all.

When John finally opened his eyes he was lying under a tree, and the first thing he saw was the west red with a brilliant sunset. The dizzy faintness that was leaving him for a bit was more deathlike than sharp pain would have been. His forehead was cold, for there was a wet linen on it, and one of his hands felt full of sawdust. He squeezed it, and the sensation told him that he pressed a human hand, soft as the breast of a bird. He turned his eyes to the direction and saw something which, after a great many years, brought back to him the memory of things he loved, of things that used to make him cry when he was a youngster, and make him awfully happy as well. He was far too in-



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jured and bruised and broken to know what it was that he saw, to know that it was only the face of a woman bending above him, and that after twelve years he was looking at Virginia Bathurst again.

CHAPTER VII

THE REASON

THE first thought he was conscious of forming, as he lay in the little room in the Big Tree Inn, where he had been carried, was the thought of his father. There are certain natures which avoid by instinct those memories which bring pain. No matter how salutary and dear those memories are, if they are likely to bring tears, they are put gently and firmly away from the mind.

John—young, gay, and keen for happiness—loved the things that brought him joy, and hated even to cast his eyes toward melancholy. During these twelve years the image of Mrs. Bathurst had not come often to him. He would never let himself think of her, any more than he would ever let himself think of his

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dead. But on this afternoon he was not master of the first conscious image that came across his reawakening brain. He found his bed in front of a window from which the shade had been raised, and through which the outside world shone bright with sunlight. He could see people passing along the village streets under the great oaks; he could even see across the road the roof of the post-office building behind the trees.

He was out of danger. He was bandaged to his eyes where Ladybird's hoofs had cut a circular swathe; he was bandaged about the legs and ribs. He had been conscious off and on without forming any consecutive thought until now.

There was no one in the room.

"Father was always unlucky," he reflected. "He seemed to have the worst kind of luck all through. I wonder if I'm going on in the same way, for this thing here has been the deuce of a muddle. Damn that horse!" Al-

FIRST LOVE

though he was extremely weak the blood rushed into his cheek. "Damn my own foolishness!"

He thought of the points of the little mare. What a bird she was! How well she had promised, and how well she would have performed if it had not been for him! His father had been a rider, a judge of horses; he had made his sensations in Syracuse—won his ribbons long before John's advent on the scene. His father would have been ashamed of him on this day. He had funked, ridden like a fool—he had ruined another man's horse.

"She must be crippled if she's alive," he thought. What would the Bathurst fellows think? What would Mr. Bathurst say? He winced. So far as the value of the horse was concerned, if he would attempt to make good it would cost him considerably over his year's income.

He couldn't remember whether any one had been in to see him as he lay here, and as

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he continued to set his thoughts in order, his blue eyes peering between the white bandages, the reason came of a sudden to him why he had missed his hurdle, and he felt an insane resentment against the reason.

He looked like a thunder-cloud. And just then Peter Bathurst, Junior, came in for his first visit.

"By George, Johnny," he cried cordially, "you're sensible!"

"Sensible enough to be mad as a hornet," answered the young man. "And I guess the lot of you are mad at me as well."

"Rot!" cried his chum comprehensively. "What do you take us for? And how do you feel, anyway?"

"Bully!" nodded Bennett feebly. "That is, I don't feel crazy; and I suppose that's an advance, isn't it?"

"You'll be all right in a day or two. The doctor says he never saw ribs and bones knit up like yours."

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"Were they *all* busted?" the invalid asked. And Peter laughed.

"There wasn't one whole rib left in you. They couldn't have found one to make another Eve."

And here the other swore lightly. "If there had been, I can tell you I wouldn't have let them make a *woman* out of it."

"Come," his friend said feelingly, "you'll have to let up a bit, Johnny, on your woman hating. Cynthia Forsythe's been staying on and on at the house for no earthly reason but to see you when you are visible."

John grunted, and Peter, who was hanging over the bed repeated:

"Do you really feel pretty good, old chap?" Then, seeing that there was a look of fatigue in his friend's eyes, he said, "I'll have to be getting on now; they told me only to stay five minutes. Nobody's allowed in here, you know—guarded like a diamond mine."

John had not dared to ask about the miser-

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able event on the field, and when his chum had gone he closed his eyes and dozed and dreamed of dashing over hurdles in a chariot made out of the night, and with stars above his head, which, as he looked closer, changed into the eyes of a woman. And dozing and dreaming and waking, finding himself stiff and lame and full of pains, he at length came again definitely into consciousness, and saw in the chair at the window a woman sitting, and as he turned she nodded, smiling.

"You're a great deal better, Mr. Bennett, and we're all *so* glad!"

It was not a nurse. She had no hat on, her hair was dark and velvet-like, a white apron came up stiffly and yet softly over her bosom, and a lot of white stuff lay in her lap—she had been sewing. She folded the work and put it away, and Bennett watched her. When she rose he saw how tall she was, how slim she was. The form of her, the breast over which the fine apron folded its snow, her

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limbs over which the long dark blue dress fell, were charming for the eyes of a young man to rest on.

Still smiling, she came to the bed, and he remembered now that this was not the first time he had watched those crinkling lines around her eyes and mouth. The little hall bedroom—recovered to his remembrance—was piled full of his father's clothes, and in the seclusion he had cried at the disposal of his household gods. The shame of the auction, which he had hated to think about, gave him a twinge. The lady sat down at his bedside. She laid one of her hands on the coverlid, and John remembered that it had rested on his father's corduroy hunting coat like a snowflake on a bit of brown earth.

But Mrs. Bathurst—did he remember her? Had he indeed ever seen her before? If he had never seen her before how could he have forgotten her? There was a little droop at the curve of her mouth corners; her cheeks were

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softly red. Her eyes were like velvet, with pretty little lines at the corners. Her dark hair grew closely around her brow, and in a pointed peak cutting into the white forehead.

She repeated, "You're a great deal better, and the doctor says we can move you this week. The other nurse has gone out for a while—I'm only one of them. And how do you feel, anyway?"

"Have you been taking care of me?"

"Now and then."

"Well, you're most awfully kind."

He didn't know what to say. He was embarrassed—embarrassed that she should see him lying his length in bed. The fact that most of his face was covered up, that he could only move one arm, that he was swathed and bandaged round, did indeed take away sufficient of the ordinary circumstances to make him feel that the occasion need not cause him the hot flush which rose all through him at her presence there.

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"You mustn't talk," she said authoritatively. "I was sorry not to welcome you the day you came to Bathurst House. I wonder if you remember that I saw you when you were a little boy?"

He did not answer.

"How long have I been knocked up here?" he asked.

"A fortnight," she said.

"Mr. Bathurst must hate me—I don't care to think how."

She smiled soothingly. "Oh, don't bother about such a thing. He's not in Tallahoe, he's in New York."

A relief came with her words. Although he didn't believe her, he was glad to know that his host didn't breathe the same air with the miserable, unsuccessful jockey.

"I feel as if I oughtn't to be so spoiled," he said a little roughly, "after the ass I made of myself."

"Don't talk," his nurse commanded again,

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"don't talk or I shall have to pull down the shade and give you something to make you sleep."

He stirred in his bandages and tried to move in his jacket of plaster. With the life that was coming back to him the keenest thing was the sense of his disgrace before them all.

"Please, Mrs. Bathurst, let me ask a little. These things trouble me when I get to sleep, they come like nightmares. What does Mr. Bathurst say?"

The smile on the face before him faded.

"Oh, why *do* you bother?" she said rather impatiently. "A fall like that might have happened to any man, and there is always some sort of an accident at the show. The only thing about it is that you are safe, that you are not killed; that is the only question to be considered. And one can't be too grateful for that, can one? And then, too, as long as it happened afterward."

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"Afterward!" he repeated vaguely. "After what?"

"Why, I mean to say, after the show—after your entry—after the judging. Of course you know you got the Ribbon. When you're better," she went on, "you'll tell me, for I shall want to ask you, why you kept on taking the hurdles."

He closed his eyes, he was getting muddled. Of course, he had gone back into that infernal nonsense-land, that was it! It was like Alice in Wonderland, things were pursuing him, and certainly this was a cruel vision.

But as he lay with closed eyes he could hear distinctly the voices of people on the piazza outside his window, and the rattle of kitchen dishes, and the calls of a little party on the croquet lawn—"Now, that's my wicket!"—so he couldn't be quite crazy.

He lifted his heavy lids again.

"Do you mind," he begged, "just explaining *what* you mean? I guess I'm dotty still.

THE REASON

I wonder if I can understand what you mean about the Ribbon."

"Why, you remember," she leaned over him, speaking softly, "that you rode Ladybird at the show?"

"Yes, I remember that!"

"And you remember that you shoved her off superbly—that she easily took the Ribbon from the whole class? Why, then, just as you were supposedly riding off, instead of doing so you went for two more hurdles, although my husband and the jury called out to you; and at the last the poor beast refused—and that's where the tragedy occurred."

"*I had won the Ribbon?*" he echoed, hearing nothing else.

"Why, yes! Yes! Everything would have been all right if you had only stopped. Didn't you know it? Why did you go on? We all have wondered."

The young fellow stared rather piteously at her. His face—what she could see of it—

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pale with unusual pain, had matured, and his boyishness for the moment was gone. He looked like an old soldier after a campaign, and from behind the snowy bandages his eyes shone like deep blue stars.

"Do you remember now, Mr. Bennett?" To herself she thought, "I'm going to make him understand it, it's just as well that he should." And she repeated gently, "Do you remember—can you tell me why you kept on at the hurdles?"

A delicate color stole into his cheek. He said weakly, "I seem to remember now that we passed the goal all right and in good shape, then I couldn't stop, I went straight on with the poor little mare. Is she dead? Don't mind, I can stand it. Is Ladybird dead? I'm sorry," he said simply, "she was a corker! Mr. Bathurst will hate me all right—I should think he would! She must have been worth a pile of money. She was the best little beast I ever rode."

THE REASON

His eyelids fell, he could have cried like a girl, there seemed to him something so unnecessary, so wanton, so mean in what he had done.

And while the lady was quite unprepared for his look he opened his eyes on her as she stood there, the apron folds across her breast, her hands still lying on the coverlid. He regarded her with a gravity that amazed her.

“The reason that I went on riding like that was that I looked up suddenly over to where the fellows said the trap was—and I saw *her*.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE BRUTE

FROM the roof, over which the leaves of the oaks, after turning to brittle brown, were beginning to fall, to the piazza at whose steps the horses were brought to be mounted, and from where one looked off to the curves and folds—the cups and dips of the Valley—Bathurst House, the whole of it, was a dwelling of enchantment to John Bennett.

He had been a guest there now for three weeks. After his removal from the Big Tree Inn they took him there, fixed him up in a fine big room with a fine big view, and with every goodness and kindness around him, and the morning and the evening of it were the first day. The whole of Bathurst House had one significance and was full of magic to the corners and roof line.

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Bathurst House was the shell that held its mistress. At any time John might see her pass through the rooms in some one of her frocks, whose grace and goodly sweep and perfume became for the young man like ceremonies, with which, as it were, he found himself all wrapped round, and in which he hid his face and pressed to his lips in his dreams at night.

He might, in handing her an object, no more important than a tea-cup or a book or her entirely marvelous handkerchief, come nearer to the perfume—be more shocked by it. He might, in giving her a trifling thing, touch her, and for this the foot-ball half-back, the sport, the young man who loved riding and hunting and outdoor, lived hour by hour, with all his young senses stirring like birds come to maturity, and longing for the one supernal flight. In one of the rooms, whose chairs, fireplace, decorations, pictures, books, and even clocks seemed charmed articles, and whose like he thought he never would see again in

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any house—in one of these rooms he might speak with her if she were sufficiently disengaged to notice him. From his group of the young people he might watch her at work at her tapestry, for she embroidered. He might spring up to get her a stool for her feet, an extra little table to rest her frame on, he might hand her a book if she were reading, and then he might watch her read.

In one of the rooms whose doors gave into the big hall he might meet her dressed for her ride; exult to see her so dressed in her close-fitting habit, severe and perfectly chaste, and yet more provoking than any other costume. He might hold her crop as she put on her thick gloves, and she seemed to draw the chamois over John's heart as he watched her fingers and the palms of her hands disappear. Although not yet strong enough to help her mount, he might follow to her horse and curse some other man who held her foot in his hand or gave her his shoulder, and stand raging at

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the sight in his hot young heart. She would then ride away into the yellow haze of Indian summer light, and a suffocation would come into John's throat, and his heart would ache, and he only lived thenceafter until from some sheltering window he would see her ride home.

In the drawing-room much later in the evening he would see her again in her unclad beauty, in the freedom the dress of a woman after six o'clock permits, and Bennett dreaded and longed for these visions at once.

And this was the way in which the young man fell first in love. This was the way the sportsman and athlete saw his heart open to a woman nearly old enough to be his mother, and beautiful enough to have charmed him down to the last of his dim old days. Like this the first woman came to him, and it was nothing but the old story over again, interesting because it was first love—because it was real. His heart was entirely virgin and en-

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tirely clean, and Virginia Bathurst wrote her name there.

He had been still another three weeks in his room, caged up, visited by his chums, visited by Miss Cynthia Forsythe, finally, just before he came down-stairs. One day Mrs. Bathurst and she came in to sit with him for tea. And John had quietly looked out at the yellow shadow of the tree before his window while Miss Forsythe read aloud and Mrs. Bathurst embroidered. The heads of both women were against the sunset, and the light found Cynthia's blonde hair no obstacle, and filtered through its gold, whereas Mrs. Bathurst's hair was a shade in which the sunlight lost itself, held back, disturbed, and stopped short. Her head thus stood out dark, clearly defined against the background of clear gold. She had stopped Cynthia's reading to say to John, "The light dazzles you!" and put her hand up to the shade.

"No, no!" he had stammered; "please leave

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it, I like to watch you sitting in the light, it makes a nice picture."

Cynthia Forsythe looked up gratefully with a blush, and it had been *her* eyes that John met.

From then on the girl's voice trembled to the end of the page.

After the two women had left the invalid, he lay for a long time in his chair, shutting his eyes to hold the vision of Virginia. He would have drawn the picture on his brain could he have done so. He could understand the sailors who tattoo images on their very flesh, he wanted to keep always the picture of her dark head against the glory of the golden sunset.

It was his last day up-stairs. The next he was down, still an invalid, but intact, notwithstanding it was another man from the one they had carried up from the Big Tree Inn. He had gone into his room with broken ribs and broken bones; he came down a solid victim of a more serious complication, and for the

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malady with which he suffered now there was no cure without sin.

"Virginia, I didn't know you were a match-maker!"

Nicholas Pynne and her husband sat by Mrs. Bathurst's side, and Mr. Bathurst, in evening dress, his red face above his white collar shining like an inebriate moon in the full, answered sarcastically:

"Virginia's so happy in *her* married life, Pynne, that she wants to fetch everybody into the ring-a-round-a-rosy!"

Peter never addressed his wife without a covert insult or a sneer, or some broad admiration which she felt harder to bear than any other form of torture. After flinging in her face his infidelities for years, he had discovered that his wife was the handsomest and most attractive woman he knew; he had returned to her and found her cold, indifferent, and with nothing for him but indomitable dislike.

"You say you forgive me, Virginia," he

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often flung at her. "I wonder if any woman can forgive a man from an iceberg, and then freeze his soul as you can."

She told herself that she had done all she could. She thought sincerely that she *had* done her very best. She tolerated her husband under the same roof and in her presence; as well as she could she covered her dislike and disgust. Divorce she dismissed; she was a Roman Catholic, moreover, and in Paris during the years when Bathurst's open scandals would have excited her to the point of separation she lived her own life freely, without hesitation, refreshed and stimulated by the flattery her beauty commanded. But no one had touched her sentiments even vaguely until these last days: she had believed herself immune. Years before she had loved her husband, and he had insulted her.

Nicholas Pynne loved her long before her marriage, and his failure to win her had spoiled his life. "After you threw me down, Vir-

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ginia," he had been used to tell her, "well, I could never get up again." And he accepted his career in a half-hearted way, only counting for important those times when he should see her, and because she forbade him, Pynne did not follow her wherever she went.

"I like to see your interest in marriage," Pynne said to her now. "I like to see a woman helping the good cause along. But you don't find Miss Forsythe as pliable as Miss Cornwallis, do you, Virginia?"

"Cynthia's a silly little fool!" returned Bathurst politely, "and Jack's far too good for her. I'll tell him so to-night after dinner."

"I don't think I'd tell him anything of the sort," Pynne said. "He'll put you in your place if you do. Did you ever let your father give you advice about your girls? I fancy not."

"I wish to God I had let him!" muttered Bathurst.

"Jack isn't in love with Miss Forsythe,"

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Prynne went on smoothly, and Mrs. Bathurst interrupted:

"Oh, don't you think so?"

"Not a bit in love," Nicholas repeated decidedly. "Any man in love himself can see it." He made no secret of his own tenderness for Virginia, and Peter Bathurst, oddly enough, had no jealousy regarding his wife's old friend, to whom he knew Virginia to be indifferent. He took a sort of delight in his companionship, and they had been friends for years.

"I don't care whether Jack likes Cynthia or not," said Bathurst rudely; "she'll give him the go-by if he asks her to marry him. She's head-over-heels in love with that bounder, John Bennett, and she doesn't care who knows it, either."

Mrs. Bathurst had long since learned to hold her tongue. It was part of her cruel strength that her husband never tortured her to a sharp reply or to a reproach. Prynne said further:

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"If what you tell me is true, old man, I'm going to watch the game."

"These girls are as *rusée* as a woman of thirty, my dear man," said Bathurst.

Mrs. Bathurst rose and left them here.

There was a group out in the hall around the piano; at it Donald Dashwood, an inveterate hunter and a gay good liver, was sitting playing and singing a hunting song.

As Mrs. Bathurst went out Peter said:

"They're a silly, giggling lot, and as green as grass, all of them."

"Well," said Pynne good-humoredly, "I must say I think Miss Forsythe's rather more like a bouquet; she's the prettiest young woman of the season."

"She hasn't the sense to make up to my son," grunted Peter, Senior; "she prefers that red-headed foot-ball player, who would be better with a foot-ball between his legs than a horse. It makes me *sick* whenever I think of that mare, Pynne."

THE BRUTE

"I don't wonder," responded the other man. "But you can't say that it didn't make him sick, too."

"I wish she had kicked a little harder, that's all," said Bathurst.

The two men passed out toward the hallway.

"I've been decent to him"—Bathurst lowered his voice—"because he's in my house, but I loved Ladybird, and there are times when I could tell him my mind."

Nicholas nodded absently. "Dashwood's got a good voice, hasn't he?"

"You're right," the host cried. "He's going to have a ripping good time now, you can believe; for they say his divorce will be granted before the week is out. Do you want to lose a little money, Nick?" his host continued, holding back Pynne by the arm.

"Well, I'd just as soon make fifty dollars off you," said Pynne, "if that's what you want me to say."

"I bet you fifty dollars," said Bathurst, "that

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I kiss that girl before to-morrow morning, and that she lets me."

Pyrrne laughed. "You're a bit stronger than she is. I don't think anything but main force would do it."

"I know the breed," said the other slowly. "These young twentieth-century girls are all alike. You can kiss any one of them fast enough."

"Don't be a brute, Bathurst," said Nicholas tartly.

"Will you bet?"

"No," said Nicholas slowly, "I will not; and you'd better not let that red-headed foot-ball player see you try."

Bathurst laughed delightedly. "That's all right," he said, "that dare of yours is as good as a bet. I don't know but I like it better. You spur me on, old man."

"All right," said Nicholas impatiently, trying to get away from him; and when he was alone he said, "Common beast! Poor Vir-

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ginia! I couldn't have turned out worse than that. She'd better have taken me twenty years ago."

CHAPTER IX

A DINNER

CYNTHIA FORSYTHE, so far from being, as Bathurst said, *rusée* and fast, didn't know evil when she saw its face. Pure-spirited, of good faith, she looked on the world as a happy festival, to which, dressed in all her youth and beauty, she was invited to partake. Mrs. Bathurst had judged her thus when for a few days she had seen her in Washington, and she had selected her for her oldest stepson. But Miss Forsythe baffled any match-making; she was a cool little flirt, and if she had much heart behind her graceful exterior, she didn't tell for whom it beat.

Mrs. Bathurst of late had been absorbed in other things than Cynthia's love-affairs. She had been nursing John Bennett back to life. The other young members of the house-party,

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Miss Cornwallis, without any one's aid or any one to interest themselves in her affairs, had carried Peter Bathurst, Junior, by storm. The two were engaged, and Cynthia was stopping on with her friend, and no longer clung to Mrs. Bathurst. She kept to herself, and as soon as John Bennett came down-stairs she had stopped flirting with Jack; she was ready to be made love to, and the right man didn't take the hint. She sat on this night at dinner next her host, of whom she was a little afraid.

When she had come to think of Virginia Bathurst at all, she pitied her. Mr. Pynne, Cynthia thought, pitied her as well. How he looks at her; he understands everything, of course! What a shame she didn't marry him instead of her horrid husband!

Virginia wore a dark dress, a little band of diamonds in her hair, a little line of them round her throat, a cluster at her breast, and her arms and hands lay along the dead white dinner-cloth like carved ivory, but of a warmer

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texture, and under the fine flesh the life ran warm.

John Bennett and Mr. Pynne sat either side of her. Pynne talked to her without interruption, she answering him wittily, with the familiarity of old acquaintance, and the young collegian watched and listened, not venturing to take too active a part. All down the table center spread the flowers, their fresh and fragrant beauty, the scent of lilies and violets, the odor of mignonette and heliotrope hung light on the air. Several of the men were in pink coats, Mr. Dashwood, as well as the host—and Peter Bathurst never looked better than in his hunting clothes, something like an English squire, and on this occasion his face was less red, and his position of host became him.

“Dashwood,” he said, “when are you going to get your divorce?”

“Got it in my pocket,” replied that gentleman gaily. “You can drink to its health if you like.”

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"My wife will congratulate you," said her husband, looking down the table at her. "You're a lucky dog, old man."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Dashwood said gallantly. "I'm inclined to think Mrs. Dashwood is the lucky one. I'm no good, anyhow."

Cynthia Forsythe looked down the table—past her best friend and her lover, past Jack, who was indifferently eating salted almonds, past Pynne to the hostess, and then at Mrs. Bathurst's left. The young man, the youngest at the table, sat with his sleek head a little bent, looking at nothing in especial. He was listening to what his hostess said with a smile on his clear young face.

"Mrs. Bathurst, you saw Nell to-day, didn't you, over at the Country Club, with the kids?" Nell was Mrs. Dashwood.

Yes, Mrs. Bathurst had seen her.

"Pining away?" asked the divorced husband, drinking as he waited to be answered.

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"No," returned the hostess slowly, "not yet."

"Ripping little kiddies!" said the father. "If I *am* to blame for them! They're not pining either, Virginia?"

"No," she laughed, "they looked very well indeed."

"Splendid!" exclaimed the father, putting his glass down. "I suppose if I marry again, and if Nell marries again, why, the other kids will be kind of first cousins all round, won't they? Nice mess, isn't it?" He grinned.

His face was brilliant, with sun and air, like the cheeks of the inveterate hunter. His hand beneath his cuff was red and tanned, the cloth was scarcely brighter.

"You'd better be glad you're a Catholic," he said to his host. "When I marry again it's going to be the Pope's daughter!"

Peter laughed. "Well, she'd be sure to get a dispensation. You'd better try somebody more obscure."

A DINNER

The Dashwood affair was a household word through the country. Husband and wife were equally popular, and each had his own friends and champions.

"Come," said Bathurst, "don't be discouraging. You and I are the only old married men here, you know, and we don't want these young people to think the world's made up of divorce courts and quarrelsome husbands and wives."

And here Pynne broke in:

"How many of you are going to the meet to-morrow?"

John Bennett, lifting up his head, said:

"I am, for one," and stopped like a sensitive horse, for fear of the blow his host might deal him. But Bathurst was otherwise engaged, and did not hear Pynne's question.

"Are you really going? Do you feel up to it yet?"

"Dashwood has loaned me his horse," said Bennett, "and I hope I won't break his legs."

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"I don't think you will," said Mrs. Bathurst quietly, "for I don't believe you'll ride to hunt. Are you quite crazy, John?"

A sudden exultation that she had forbidden him, *that she had cared* to forbid him, was followed by anger because she spoke to him as though he were a boy. A spirit of contradiction that often rises in the early stages of love, and a desire that her pleading should be further pushed, made John say:

"But I've got to make a move sometime, I guess. I'm all right, and Dashwood's horse is over from the farm for me."

Mrs. Bathurst, looking at him as she might at Jack or Peter, said:

"Oh, you mustn't even think of it, you're certainly not up to it."

John felt Pynne's eyes on him in a fatherly fashion, and he raged. He hated Nicholas Pynne with his cool assurance, his infernal cheek, as the young man called it.

"Are you riding?" he asked shortly.

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"I should say I was!" returned the congressman. "I didn't come up here in the Valley to miss a hunt."

"Are *you*?" John's blue eyes, which avoided Mrs. Bathurst as a rule, met the sparkle of those dark ones now, met the look of amusement and kindness.

"Why, of course," she said; "I have been longing for the hunt. I think every one is riding but you."

A stupid, silly fury sprang up in him, and if a fiery horse with death in his nostrils had appeared, he would have thrown himself on the beast gladly, and ridden to perdition just to prove his obstinacy. He would show how strong he was.

"Dashwood," he cried excitedly across the table, "it's all right, isn't it, about that horse of yours?"

"Certainly. He's waiting for you to break his legs, my dear chap. He'll be cooling down his heels at the proper time to-morrow. Just

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telephone down to-night to the stables and speak to the head groom."

"All right," said Bennett easily, "thanks a thousand times, old man."

The lady glanced at him, surprised, then answered Nicholas Pynne's remark, whatever it may have been, and turned her face from her obstreperous invalid. She paled slightly, and Bennett had the satisfaction of knowing that he had been rude and a boor, ungrateful, impossible, and that he had displeased her. His folly made his heart sore, but as he pushed his chair a little back from the table he felt more like a man.

Bathurst had got up and gone out of the room to the telephone, and had not heard the conversation, so he had no chance to throw a barbed dart at poor Bennett regarding his ride.

"I say, Cynthia!" he called back into the room. "Come here a second, will you? Somebody's got you on the telephone. Washing-

A DINNER

ton wants you." And Cynthia left precipitately, her first thought being incontinently, "Oh, I hope mother isn't going to tell me to come home!"

Miss Forsythe was so little *rusée* and so perfectly sweet and of good faith that she ran out of the dining-room in answer to her Washington call, and into the telephone booth, whose door Peter Bathurst, Senior, held open for her, with but one thought in her mind, "Oh, dear, I hope they are not sending for me to go home!" And when a few minutes later she returned to the dining-room she was very much disturbed, breathing rather fast, and it would have been plain for any one to see, who looked twice at her, that she had had some kind of shock.

Two of the guests looked twice at her—Pyrnne and Jack Bathurst. No one else.

"Bad news?" Jack asked. "What's up?"

"No," Cynthia stammered, "nothing very bad."

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And Grace Cornwallis, who lived in one long dream of bliss, came out of her Arcadia long enough to remark to her friend:

"Why, Cynthia, is your mother ill?"

And here Miss Forsythe recovered her composure and laughed, pulling her wits together.

"Why, nobody's ill. It's nothing but a stupid telephone mistake. It was Buffalo wanting to talk to the Washingtons over the hill."

But Cynthia joined Miss Cornwallis, and Peter, Junior, and the girls went out together, arm-in-arm, from the dining-room. Pyrrne looked for Bathurst, who did not appear, and then looked at the girl in an amused and rather conscience-stricken fashion. Cynthia, in a big chair in the corner of the room, saw John Bennett cross over to her. The occurrence was rare and she waited with delight, the discomfort of the telephone experience for the moment overshadowed.

John was very tall, he carried his inches

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well, his shoulders were like a young Titan's; his bones had knit well, his flesh had returned to him, his simple life and habits, his good spirits, and good temper had pulled him back rapidly.

Cynthia didn't know that he was annoyed and miserable, and calling himself a rude ass. He came and sat down by her side.

"I can't tell Grace," she thought, "she's too much in love with Peter, and it would make her fearfully angry. I can't tell Mrs. Bathurst, least of all. I can't tell Pynne, he'd laugh at me most likely, and then he's Mr. Bathurst's friend. I can't go home yet, I don't want to go home. I don't want to go!"

"How about getting up at five o'clock tomorrow morning, Miss Forsythe?" Bennett asked her.

"Oh, I'm quite up to it," she replied. "But really and truly, Mr. Bennett, you oughtn't to ride yet, you know."

"Oh, bosh!" said John. "Don't you join

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in and make me out a mollycoddle. I thought you were a sport."

"I'm not," she said definitely, "I'm not a bit of a sport. I begin to think I must be a coward and a silly little fool."

John bent his blue eyes on her in surprise. The type of the girl he had made love to all his youth was before him in Cynthia Forsythe. If Milly Haven had gone on being and existing in his environment she would have been like this, slender, well-groomed, charming, fine.

Cynthia's eyes were softer than Milly Haven's, and kinder. She looked like a bouquet of jasmine all in white and very sweet, and there was something in her which seemed to question the young man as she looked up at him from the depths of her chair. He hadn't observed her much before. He knew that she was rich, pretty, and that Jack would please his family if he married her. He knew that Jack teased him and said that Cynthia was "mad about John Bennett." Girls had

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been crazy about him ever since he had shone out at a party in Boston, his red head above his first stiff shirt, and his first black coat; and he had licked a fellow that night, at his first ball. Because Cynthia Forsythe's eyes were something like Milly Haven's John recalled that escapade.

"Do you know," he said abruptly with a little laugh, "I have just thought of something rather funny." He had been too long out of the sentimental game, he said to himself. Too long out of the way of making pretty speeches. He thought he would take a turn now, and he leaned over Cynthia.

"Do you know," he repeated, "that I lambed a fellow half to bits for a girl who had eyes like yours?"

But he had spoken far better and more to the point than he could have imagined now.

"Did you really?" Miss Forsythe exclaimed. She sat up from her languid position. "Did you?"

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John nodded and laughed. He was thinking of the fight, and how the boy had met his blows.

"I don't know why I should remember it especially," he said; "one fight's about like another, only, you see, your eyes made me think of it, I suppose."

"What did the boy do?" Miss Forsythe asked.

"He didn't do it," John said. He put his hands in his pockets and leaned back in his chair. "That was the point."

"What did he try to do?"

"He tried to kiss the girl who gave the party, of course," said John, "behind the door, and she got out and I got in. That's all. Very easy to do. It wasn't what you'd call party manners by a good deal, and the girl's mother sent us both home in a cab!"

"I hope," said Miss Forsythe with animosity, "that you pounded him well."

"I licked him the best I could," said John

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with satisfaction. "And he was my chum as well, which went against the grain."

"I wish," said Cynthia abruptly, "that you'd do a little licking for me."

John raised his eyebrows.

"Really?" he said. "Who?"

The words once out of Miss Forsythe's mouth, she regretted them. She grew cold; she had gone on as girls do when in the atmosphere of the man they like. She looked pinched and rather frightened, and as John looked at her the bright attraction she had for the moment possessed faded.

"Not Jack?" he asked. "Not another chum, eh?"

He looked around the room.

Peter and his fiancée were already in some friendly deserted room across the hall. Mrs. Bathurst was playing solitaire on a little table before the fire. Her profile was toward them. One by one she laid the cards before her in their sequence. Nicholas Pynne, Dashwood,

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and the host smoked before the fire. John's eyes caught the flash of her hand as she shuffled her cards.

"Whom shall I lick?" he repeated absent-mindedly.

"Not Jack," the girl whispered timorously, "and not Peter, of course, and not Mr. Pymne—"

"By George!" said John sympathetically, coming back to her. "What, he! that old soak, the old bully?" He stared at her. "Do you mean to say—"

Cynthia, in that moment, as his warm young voice took her part, went over to John Bennett with all the rest of her that had not gone before. What a big, splendid champion he would be! What a man he seemed! Carried away by his sympathy she murmured:

"Oh, ever since I came he's been too horrid. I knew he was that kind. Mother warned me, and I have kept away. I haven't told Grace or any one, but to-night when he called

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me out to the telephone, of course there wasn't any message."

"I see," said John encouragingly. "I see, the old brute! He tried to kiss you?"

"Yes," she answered, "and I slapped his face so that my hand stung."

"Good!" said John. "I'm glad of that."

Oh, yes, he knew what a brute Bathurst was. But the host, for some reason or other best explained by his peculiar temperament, had not vented his spleen on John, even though the boy had spoiled his horse. On the contrary, he had been fairly decent to him, and with the exception of one or two cutting remarks he had let John alone. But as he sat beside the young girl who had confided in him, his sympathy was pouring forth, not to her, but to the other woman before her cards. One by one Mrs. Bathurst laid the little bits of pasteboard down. Her rings sparkled; the gems on her dress sparkled; the line of diamonds in her hair sparkled as well. She was a

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brilliant figure in the firelight that drew its red kerchief along her bare arm. The blood which at any long looking on her stung John's veins rose now.

"I'd like to break his neck," he said brutally, and he clenched his hands.

But Miss Forsythe had experienced the relief which her confidence brought, and she was less exaggerated in her belligerent demands for redress.

"Isn't it too disgusting?" she said, "too disgusting; but of course one can't do much about it."

"You see," said Bennett, "after all, we are his guests. I am particularly. I've been looked after like one of the family. I'm heavily in his debt."

"Oh, I don't want you to whip him behind his own door, Mr. Bennett. I only wanted to tell some one, and I told you."

"I'm glad you did," he said simply. "Bathurst must have been drunk, of course. But

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he's a beastly cad. If he bothers you any more let me know."

John couldn't tell why he offered this sudden championship, which he would certainly find it difficult to live up to in a man's own house, that is, unless he was to leave that house for ever.

Miss Forsythe said rather foolishly, "Oh, of course, if he gets too bad I can go!"

"Yes," said John, with too cruel indifference. "Of course." For just then Mrs. Bathurst finished her Patience and looked up triumphantly.

"I made it, Nick!" she called. "Twice running."

"First-rate! Shall we gamble on it? Five dollars for the first two made."

"If you like! Only I forget where I put the other Patience cards. Oh, I remember, the drawer in my dressing-table!"

Bennett sprang up, and without a word to the girl whose side he left, "Let me get them!"

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he offered, and went two steps at a time up the stairs on her errand at the first sound of her voice.

Once or twice with Jack or Peter, Junior, John had passed the threshold of the room toward which he made his way. He had seen the interior the day before, when, with her husband, he had gone into the boudoir for a cup of tea. But he wanted to go to that room alone, and he went toward it now with an eagerness that was almost a thirst. The door was open, but there was no light. On the couch her dressing-gown was thrown, her slippers were beside it on the floor. There was a book with a paper-cutter between the leaves, and on the left the piece of furniture in whose drawer the cards had been placed.

Bennett stood a second just over the door-sill, and drew a long breath. The same fragrance he connected with her hung on the air of the room. A little fire burned in the grate, and this was the only light; he saw the

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objects in its flickering radiance. No one had come up-stairs, the servants were at dinner, and the bedrooms deserted, yet voices made a confusion in his ears like the sea.

Through the open door he looked into the bedroom. It was very white and great and vast, it seemed like a world; the bed was open. The aspect of the place, the home it was for her, the fact that it sheltered her for many hours and for the most intimate hours—the place it was overcame the boy as if it had been filled with a sudden light that smote his eyes. Leaning against the door frame he held the soft, silken curtains that hung between in his hands. The room, white and sweet, unfolded to him like a lily; it enveloped him, he felt his heart swell and his limbs grow weak. Something like a cry came from his lips, and the sweat rose on his brow. He brushed his hand across his forehead and eyes. Shivering with emotion, then shaking like a man who has seen a ghost, he went from the room and

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down-stairs. Half-way down he remembered the cards. "What an ass I am!"

He started back again.

But Mrs. Bathurst's voice called him from the hall, "What's the matter? Can't you find them? Why, you look as though you'd seen a ghost!"

Bennett put a good face on it; the sight of her brought him to reason. He tried to laugh.

"And you talk of riding to-morrow!" she said reproachfully.

They stood facing on the landing, she in her dark glistening dress and her proud beauty.

"She thinks of me as though I were her son," he thought, seeing her interest and her solicitude.

"I'll make you a cocktail," she said, and took his arm and led him down the stairs, "and afterward you must go to bed. You've only been about for a week, and you talk of hunting to-morrow. Why, you're clearly crazy!"

"Yes," said Bennett, "I guess I am."

CHAPTER X

AN INTERVIEW

BENNETT found himself in the big fine room where he had convalesced and where Mrs. Peter Bathurst had tended him. He threw himself on his bed in his shirt sleeves, and drew his reading lamp down to his side.

He had come up sturdily and simply, and he was a strong, live, natural human being, scarcely out of his boyhood and yet already a man. He knew what his pulsations and his heart-beats meant, what his desires meant. He knew that in his short history he had never lived until now; he knew that he was a traitor under his host's roof, and that the pain he felt was far and away greater than any happiness it gave him to be in the presence of Peter Bathurst's wife.

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What would she say if she knew? He had asked his naïve heart this question scores of times. She would more than likely laugh at him, for her humor was very keen. She would probably berate him kindly, for she didn't hesitate to speak her mind about his merits, and tonight she had sent him off to bed like a boy. To her he was a boy, nothing more. A little bigger than the youngster to whom she had given the gun, the friend of her stepsons, a fellow just out of college, just facing life—callow, inexperienced, and scarcely to be taken into account. John acknowledged that he was all this, and he was glad he had a whole bunch of things to learn. What man of twenty-four hasn't? Couldn't he learn as well as the next man? Couldn't he cut out his life as well as that round-faced congressman? A dozen careers were open to a man who had a little money to start in with. She had hinted that a political life, a diplomatic life was a good thing to consider. John wondered if she

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had thought of him and his future when she made the few remarks he remembered about a diplomatic career. She didn't like doctors, and as soon as he found this out all idea of taking up medicine as a profession was put out of his mind, thus breaking to bits a favorite scheme of Doctor Brainard's. Well, would she follow his career and his life, whatever it might be, with interest? Perhaps, after she had done thinking about Peter and Jack, she would think sometimes of how John Bennett was getting along, the third of the college boys, that was the only position he could hope to take.

"Damn!" he muttered, and with the word cast his beautiful youth down. What did one want with youth, anyhow? It only served as stepping-stones to riper age; it was a footstool under his feet which he would be glad to kick at and be forty in a twinkling. But this phase passed, the very buoyancy, the elasticity of his youth sprang back to place and lifted him with

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its green, vigorous swing. It was bully, after all, to be young! He could now cut out his whole life in a way she would approve. Suppose he had already planned some beastly line of life in a walk she disapproved. Suppose he had started his fortunes, or was irrevocably about to do so, in some part of the country where he could never see her again?

He determined in a flash to look up whatever business ventures Syracuse had to offer, to set himself to work there, and to make his way under her very eyes. He would become rich and important, every one in town would talk of him, and if he were always near he could watch over her and protect her. John liked the word, and repeated it, thinking of the brute her husband was.

"Poor girl!" he said timidly, scarcely daring to form the words in his mind, but, daring as they were, his first approach to leveling between them the distance of years, all the distance there was, brought him a bit nearer

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to her. He said again, "Poor girl!" and in an instant leaped to the forty years he had longed to possess. At any rate, his thoughts of her to-night could not exactly be called protection.

Here John found it more salutary to remember how good she had been to him while he was ill. He didn't know what a mother's care was, he had never known it, but he couldn't believe it was like this. So far as sisters were concerned, they made the mischief in a man's room, his friends had told him so. Every corner of the room where he was had a memory for him of her nursing and her presence. She had read by his window, she had stood by his bed, she had taken her place as soon as the professional nurse left—and oh, heavens! the change! It was like waiting for a cool spell after heat, it was like waiting for friendly warmth after bitter cold, it was like food after hunger, and drink after thirst.

The comings into his room of Mrs. Bathurst,

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every single one of them, had been a romance. John could see her across his threshold with a plate of fruit in her hands. He had just waked up one day to see her waiting, and she had so stood a second, smiling, until his eyes were fully opened. No, certainly it was not as though she were part of a family that she had cared for him. He didn't feel it so, at any rate, but no doubt it was all his tom-fool sentimentality, and had nothing to do with her. What would she think if she knew? It made him rage to think that she would ridicule his feelings.

There was no insult just to love a woman, was there? Mr. Pynne made no bones about it, and she tolerated his devotion and his asinine leers (poor Nicholas was the very pink of courteous dignity). Men had loved her everywhere. Peter and Jack had told him something about their stepmother's life abroad. She was used to it. A man of twenty-four isn't a baby, it's only that the older men have more

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nerve, more side, they have worn off their sensibility. Every word of school-boy flirtation seemed ridiculous to him, and the girls he had courted, like paper dolls. His sharp thought cut into them like scissors. He repeated to himself as he had done when a little boy, in his habitual slang. "She's a corker! She beats the record! There's no one like her, and darned if she wouldn't make a stone feel!"

Here John rose and began to walk slowly to and fro in his room. If he should venture to make the least sentimental advance to her—and he hadn't, as he thought of it, the least idea how he should do so—she would send him about his business. The only thing to do was to have the folly over as soon as possible, and to put it out of his mind. Here in her very house, seeing her every day, was no place to cure such a disease. He had planned to go on Monday, at any rate, and this was Thursday. He would go in and see Brainard, and make his plans to start out West. There was

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an opening for him, a good one, and Brainard approved. He'd break new ground.

Poor Bennett realized as he pondered how passive the thought of her had been, how persistent, and that it crowded everything else out of his mind. The idea of the West before he came to the Valley had seemed a bully one, and full of the charm of the new, the untried, the promising of great success. Now the fact that it would take him thousands of miles from her, and that it was to be a definite break in his feelings, made the idea of it sink on his heart like lead. He needed her to lift up and light up every plan. It wouldn't be easy to go on at first.

The boy stopped before his window and looked into the stillness of the moonlight. It was frosty and cold, something like a vague mist blew across the moon and over the lawn. The night was growing obscure, it would be settling down to a true misty hunting morning. The last thing he had done was to give her his

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promise not to think of hunting the next day. When she shut the door on him she had shut him up like a good boy. The memory of it helped him a little here. Did he want to dangle about a beautiful woman like a booby? Did he want to stammer out his profession and be laughed at? Suppose she didn't laugh? Suppose she should attach him as she did Nicholas Pynne? He nodded his bright head emphatically. "Not for me!" he said.

He would put an end to the darned fool business the very next day. He would ask the Forsythe girl to marry him. "She's a nice little thing," John reflected patronizingly, "and Jack told me to go ahead, that'll fix up the business." The fact that he was so determined to end his passion here only proved how little he knew of its real strength. He knit his brows, decided to cut his sentimentality short, approved himself thoroughly, and felt a great satisfaction in his decision, and a sort of triumphant spleen, too. "I wonder what Mrs.

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Bathurst will say? How'll she like it? She picked the girl out for Jack."

But Bennett's plan couldn't last long, there was too little air in its inflation, it sank suddenly. Cynthia Forsythe had no personality to him, she was nothing but a paper doll, and in her place was raised forcibly the picture of the living woman with her glorious form which his young arms longed for, with her lips for which his young lips ached. He breathed a few words aloud, stretched out his arms toward the moonlight as though he would embrace the night, and his words might have been a curse on his folly, a protest against his youth, or they might have been something like a prayer.

He decided that he couldn't go to sleep in the state he was, and he put his smoking-jacket on and went into the hall quietly. It was only midnight, and the house was still lighted. Bennett walked softly and aimlessly toward the library, where he thought he would get a book, and read and smoke until something like sleep

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came to him. There was no one in the library, and, standing before the big shelves, he searched for something to attract his fancy.

He heard just without the door, after a few seconds, his host's voice saying :

"That's all right, Cynthia, that's all right, little sweetheart. Give me a kiss?"

Bennett veered round, struck to attention, and recalled that he had promised to champion the girl, and, moreover, that he was going to ask her to marry him the next day.

He started forward, determined to take the consequences, whatever they might be. If Bathurst should put him out of the house that would settle things at any rate.

He heard her make a little exclamation of protest, and then he came without a sound into the hall.

Bathurst set the girl free in a moment, and without a word to either man she flew down the hall toward the stairway that led to her rooms.

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"Eavesdropping?" Bathurst sneered, his ruddy color faded.

"No," said Bennett simply, "not much, and you don't think it."

Bathurst laughed disagreeably. "Are you as good at listening at key-holes as you are at breaking horses' legs?"

"I'm trying to remember that I'm in your house," the young man said with an effort, and as he looked at the red, bloated face, and realized how much drink had gone before his host's exhibition of sentimentality, his feelings changed to plain disgust. Mr. Bathurst was half drunk.

"You mean that if you weren't in my house you'd kick me down-stairs—do up the master as you did the horse."

And John said to himself, "I've been under his roof six weeks, and he owes me a grudge already."

Mr. Bathurst didn't want his wife to know. In spite of his freebooting, in spite of his in-

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fidelities, he did not want Virginia to know. She made him angry, she piqued him, she denied him everything, but he had still some hope of winning her regard. He said more temperately:

"Look here, Bennett, is it after all any of your business? I shall certainly kiss whom I like in my own house. Why do you stand there like a chump and stare at me? Didn't you ever kiss a girl? You'd better begin if you haven't." He fumbled in his pockets for a cigar. "Come on in the study and let's have a smoke, and I'll ring for some booze."

He looked about in the library for the matches, and, striking one, continued to speak, with his cigar in his mouth.

"She's a damned pretty girl, and she liked it, I swear. What time is it, anyway? Half-past twelve?"

Bathurst took a chair and pointed to the one opposite, nodding to John. "Sit down; you make me nervous. I don't want to go to bed.

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It'll be morning before you know it, and the hunt is on for five."

After a second of thought the young man sat down, facing his host.

"Light up," Bathurst invited, "and break up that gloomy face of yours. You look like a prayer meeting. Why don't you marry that giggling little girl, then you could kick me with some reason? Confound it, what business is it of yours, anyway? If I heard a man kissing a girl in the hall I'd have the good sense to stay where I was. Hunting to-morrow?"

"No."

"Won't any one trust you with a mount?"

"Dashwood has given me one," said John rather tartly.

"Well," said his host, "to show you that I haven't any hard feeling you can have your pick at my stables."

The young man remembered at his companion's words how he had promised not to hunt. And at this second the idea that she cared, and

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made a point of it, gave him a flash of such great happiness that it softened his face as he looked at the older man; it did the work of breaking up his gloomy "prayer-meeting" expression better than Bathurst could have asked.

"Guess I'm not up to riding to-morrow. Little rocky still."

Bathurst smiled fatuously, his red, bloated hands on the arms of the chair, his glass of whisky-and-soda by his side. He poured in more rye, fizzed it up, and took a long drink. He ran his trembling hands in his collar, and loosened his cravat.

"It's all right about Ladybird," he nodded gracefully. "I don't lay it up against you, Bennett."

"You've been awfully kind about it, Mr. Bathurst," the young man said. They had never mentioned the subject between them before. "I was an infernal ass, and I feel like a murderer. I haven't said a word about it because the fellows told me that you had asked

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especially that I would shut up on the subject, so I've done so; but I'm hoping some time, in some way or other, to—"

"Bosh!" said his host, "nonsense!" He finished his drink. It was just the last swallow of the strong liquor needed to complete his state. He could hardly control his smile, it seemed to flutter about his lips; but he had the idea that he was very affable and generous.

"You can say anything you like about that kissing business, I expect you'll make fun of me. I don't care, Bennett," he leaned solemnly over toward the young man, "I don't care 'bout any girls, I only care 'bout one woman. She's the only woman in the world for me."

His guest stiffened, his face grew white under his ruddy hair. A sickening dislike of the man before him came on him.

"She's very cold," the husband said; "she doesn't care for me now, but she will." He nodded stupidly. "You just watch, she'll come round again."

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He took his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his eyes, to which the inebriate tears were stealing.

"Fill up your glass, Bennett," he said, "don't be a milksop. You don' like whisky? Wha' d'you like?"

John rose. "Let's get to bed," he said. "Let's get a little sleep before the meet's on."

Bathurst shut his eyes and shook his head. "Goin' t' sleep here, won't go home till mornin'!"

John got his arm under the man's shoulders, and with much persuasion Mr. Bathurst managed to leave the library, leaning heavily and affectionately on John, finally dragging and staggering as far as his own door. There he held the young man back.

"Stop," he said, "ain't goin' any farther. Goin' to wait right here till Cynthia comes back!"

"Oh, come on!" said John impatiently, "she's gone to her room. You'll see her at the meet."

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"Don' tell Mrs. Bathurst," Bathurst whispered. "Don' tell her."

Bathurst's valet, hearing the approach, came out from his master's room, and between the two men, for Bathurst needed all the support available, the host crossed his threshold.

"Goo' night, Benny," he said, shaking John's hand violently, "you're real sport. See you t'morrow."

The man told John that he could manage without him, and gathered his master together, and led him within the merciful shelter of his own door.

John's rooms and the other men's rooms were in the bachelor quarters, between the salon and library, and the staircase up which Cynthia Forsythe had disappeared led to the apartments of Mrs. Bathurst and her women guests.

It seemed to the young man who, set free by the locking of the host's door, went to his own rooms again, that he could not bear the atmos-

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phere of the house another day. To be sure, his host in his sickening stupor was separated from his wife by two halls and a staircase, but the very idea that there was between the man and the woman a bond which would permit this brute to go to her if he wished was beyond the endurance of Bennett's clean, vigorous love.

CHAPTER XI

THE MORNING WALK

WHEN John came down the following morning the foggy mist that had flown all night like wet *sartis* across the country had blown off toward the north, and the crisp morning air was clear of rain.

Bennett was the first of the household to come down-stairs; as was the fashion in the Bathurst establishment, where the mistress was half continental in her habits, he had taken his coffee and eggs and bacon in his own room.

He had not been standing more than five minutes on the porch facing the drive and the cold dawn when some one came out behind him. It was the lady of the house herself. Mrs. Bathurst wore her pink coat, her white stock with its diamond horseshoe, her black

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three-cornered hat, and in her hand she held her riding-crop and gloves.

"I suppose you couldn't resist the charm of early rising," she said with amusement. "I didn't know that anything could get a young man up at five in the morning unless he were pulled out of bed; especially since you're not going to ride. I don't believe you've had a bit of breakfast!"

John, who had scarcely slept, and whose later doze had been disturbed by the fear that he might be too late, met her keen look, for the lady wondered what made him so pale. The way in which he had replied to her kindness the night before had told her that she must be more tactful in her handling of him, and she did not question him now.

Over the roads and the lawns, as they stood side by side on the porch, something like dew rose on the stubborn grass and covered the brown, dry forests, and something like dew lay between the sun and the earth.

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"Doesn't it smell good?" she said, drawing her breath. "Gives one the feeling of wanting to swim out into it, of going off somewhere. It's so fresh and marvelously unspoiled."

"It only makes me want to ride like the deuce," Bennett responded. "It's a miserable shame that I'm not well enough to go."

"Well, since you can't, since you've given in so gracefully," said Mrs. Bathurst, "let's walk over to the Big Tree Inn. It's only a ten minutes' walk, and I don't believe it will be too much for you."

She could have suggested nothing that he wanted more; nothing would be better than to leave behind them the house with its master, Nicholas Pyrnne, and the rest, and go away alone with the lady.

He refused blankly to take either hat or overcoat, and thinking perhaps that if they delayed the others would come down and spoil their adventure, Mrs. Bathurst did not urge him, and he walked along beside her, his slim

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young figure tall and slender as a small tree, his bright head high with the pride of his good fortune.

Virginia Bathurst thought this friend of her stepsons charming. He had touched her sympathies as a little boy. Standing between the curtains of the dingy, dismantled house, the victim of the auctioneer's hammer, dispossessed and penniless, this little habitant about whom the ruins were fallen, had spoken to her sympathies twelve years before. She had known his delightful father, and it was in affectionate regard for Mr. Bennett that she had gone to the auction sale, and there the purchase of a few objects of art, books, and China, had become of secondary interest beside the anxious face of the boy who watched the sale. She had never forgotten the incident or his visit of a few days at Bathurst House.

She had aroused his frank, boy admiration, she had seen it in his intent blue eyes. Brusque, slangy, moody as he was, he had even then pos-

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sessed that rare quality which made him "fascinating" to the girls, and which had touched the woman in her then. An older man might have displayed the devotion which, although he did not know it, red-headed, freckled, little John Bennett had shown this selfsame lady twelve years before.

It was with some such remembrance of him that she had rushed over to the field after his accident, and lifted his poor bruised head on her knee. It was with some such memory in her mind that with a sudden leap of her heart she had seen the splendid fellow ride his race, had seen him lifted something like a vision on beautiful Ladybird. John stood out among the commonplace men around him, and when she had seen him fall, for a moment she had covered her face with her hands and been surprised at her excess of personal terror, alarm, and solicitude.

With the perfection of womanliness she had nursed the big chap. If not too much to say,

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he wouldn't have pulled through as he had without that lovely care. She thought with something of pride that her care had not been altogether in vain, as he walked beside her now in the morning sunlight, with his vigorous swing, his long steps, close to her, toward the town.

Women who are ardent by nature or possessed of imagination are always sure to be dupes of themselves, as well as a prey to sentiment, and particularly fit to suffer. Mrs. Bathurst was unconscious of any but a friendly interest in her stepsons' friend. Their conversations had been few, but Bennett proved an unusual listener, drinking in what she said, storing her opinions deeply away.

Mrs. Bathurst took things easily, otherwise she would not have been able to endure her life with her husband. But she didn't realize how often she had thought about John; and just in the bright morning light, struck by his pale face and the marks of sleeplessness, she

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was wondering about his plans for the future, and hesitated to ask.

"Have you been thinking at all what you are going to do when you leave here next week?" The question fell with the decision John had made the night before.

"I'm going West." He remembered with a pang as he replied that this venture on his part was the very one thing she had advised him *not* to do when they had talked together!

His response was curt, and his intention evidently fixed. She looked at him in surprise and said, "Oh, really? I suppose money is the thing; and if you do go in for it you must make a big fortune."

By this time they had ascended the incline to the village street, and the town clock was striking six. The street was already alive with country people and townsfolk, coming to watch the meet. Buggies and light wagons, covered vehicles and smart traps, toiled through the rich sand road. Red coats shone out here and there.

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The Big Tree Inn blinked with its green vines behind the trees; and about the horse-block the hunters, sleek and slender, thin-flanked and long-legged, gathered—shining bays, grays, and roans—and to the left the master of the hounds, Donald Dashwood, with his grooms, held the black-and-white hounds in leash.

But Virginia Bathurst's figure was the one that John Bennett looked at—supple, slender as a girl's, there was a sweep about her, a bloom, a fire that made her different to them all. John felt that she might be a queen at a royal meet.

"She has a proud face," he said to himself; "I wonder who would dare to offend her."

He could almost think he saw a picture of her on some regal hunting preserve, and read out, "The Queen rides to the hounds to-day."

Nicholas Pynne and the others had come up. Her horse stood at the block, and Virginia's husband lifted her into the saddle.

Bathurst nodded curtly to John with a look of suspicion. As soon as he heard that the two

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had walked over to the inn Bathurst had said to himself, "I'll bet four to one that he's been sayin' something to Virginia."

As attractive as was the scene about the inn, John saw little but the figure of the woman on her roan horse, her body like a poppy in the pink cloth of her coat, her dark little head set well on her neck. She gathered up the reins between her hands and moved away.

John jumped up on the big white horse-block under the trees and stood there, the one unsporting figure in his blue serge clothes. He was out of it, a miserable bystander in the face of such ripping sport.

Jack and Peter, Junior, had come up with Miss Cornwallis. After the calls and shouts and sallies and hubbub, the panting of the dogs, Bennett called over to Dashwood:

"Say—think I'll drive over and meet you at the cross-roads."

But there was no response to this. He said it again more loudly, hoping *she* might hear him.

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Pyrnne was at Mrs. Bathurst's stirrup, shortening it; she was bending down to him, laughing, unconscious of the young man on the horse-block who spoke for her alone.

John thrust his hands in his pockets and glowered at the gay, cheerful scene.

"Go home, Johnny," Jack called to him, "and keep Miss Forsythe company; she didn't come."

And Miss Cornwallis added, "Oh, do look after Cynthia, won't you, Mr. Bennett? She was too tired to get up this morning. I hated to leave her."

Bennett muttered an ungracious word under his breath. The house seemed like a prison to which he couldn't bring himself to return.

The hounds were freed. At a long blast from the horn they dashed away with a cry like mad creatures, flashing through the village street, pounded after by the hunters. Whether or not the words that John had given out that he would ride to the cross-roads had

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reached her, Mrs. Bathurst didn't look toward him until they started away. Then she gave a glance back, and saw him as he stood—six feet of blue serge, of anger and spleen—glowering out into the sun-filled space before him, the light on his bare head. She waved her crop gaily, and his passionate, angry eyes followed her pink coat until a curve in the road hid her from sight. Then the buggies and wagons filled up the road again, a butcher's cart slunk out and rattled down the street; the loiterers and hangers-on about the village post-office and the taverns straggled up the steps to the porch of the Big Tree Inn. The odor of coffee and bacon floated out to assure the world that the ordinary course of events would pursue the tenor of its way, in spite of the hunt.

Pleasure had died for the young man who, like Adam with his Eve in the morning of the world, had walked in the dew of the early hours from Bathurst House. The common-placeness of the objects before him gave him a

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physical disgust. For the first time in twenty-four years he was a victim of ennui; until the hunt returned he shouldn't know how to live!

He went up the steps of the inn, and through to the bar. He had drunk for pleasure, for goodfellowship plenty of times in his life, but never before for misery. He ordered his drink, and when it stood before him on the counter, turned his glass between his hands, a frown on his face. The bartender, who had gone into the office, now came back, his napkin thrown over his arm.

"Somebody wants John Bennett on the telephone."

As though Mrs. Bathurst could have telephoned him from her saddle, at some hedge or ditch, John rushed off.

Bathurst House had called him up.

"Oh! Mr. Bennett, did you see Mrs. Bathurst? . . . Did she tell you that we are to take the dog-cart and follow over to Moreland Farms and see the meet pass? . . . Oh, *I'm*

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all right, thanks! . . . Want to go awfully, don't you? . . . You'll be right over?"

John dashed from the booth, and without stopping, rushed from the inn.

"Hi!" the bartender called after him, "that there cocktail!"

"Drink it yourself!" John flung him a dollar and was out of the inn, down the steps and into the road before the man could follow.

"Here, you, take me over to Bathurst House, will you?"

He held up the butcher's cart and climbed into the seat by the man's side. His face lit up, he jollied the butcher boy, drank in the fresh odors of the country, and his cheeks began to warm.

In a couple of hours, if only for a second, he should see her again as she shot across a meadow, and he might watch that dash of pink that made his heart leap every time he thought about it.

The bartender, as the butcher's cart rattled

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down the road toward the hill, turned the cocktail back into a bottle, and put the dollar in his pocket. He was not a drinking man.

“Wonder what made that fellow leave his drink? Girl on the wire, I guess. When girls don’t drive a man to drink they make him sour on his food,” he said, as though he regarded his cocktails in the light of repasts.

CHAPTER XII

THE PROPOSAL

AN hour later, driving across the country with Miss Forsythe, John calmed to something like reason and common sense. For a good part of the night he pondered over his state of nerves and his folly, and he was able to see that he was very much of an idiot, that he needed sound, strong measures to cure his imbecility. Cynthia Forsythe had welcomed him back, the only other guest at Bathurst had insisted that he take some kind of refreshment that went by the name of early luncheon before they started, and a pretty girl is at her best when she urges a man to be comfortable. Cynthia had served him herself, and sat later by his side in the buggy, not in the least like a girl who has passed a horrid night, who has been bothered to death by her host, and who is

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gently, though truly, unhappy about her own unfortunate love affair.

The young people rode out from Bathurst to follow the meet in a classic buggy, a long-stepping horse between the thills, and the pretty Washington girl by Bennett's side, after feeding him and giving him to drink, did her best now to amuse the absorbed young man. Selfishly suffering and sentimental as he was, no topic would have interested him greatly but to talk of himself or of Mrs. Bathurst. Cynthia did not lead to the subject of the lady!

She referred to the "licking" he had given his school-fellow at the party, and from here John went on to tell her something about his boyhood.

"There at Jones' Mills," he pointed with his whip across country, "there's the steeple of the church they told us to look out for. We'll make it all right by this road to the left, and I guess they'll cross us there."

They were within three miles of the point

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where they were to wait for the meet, and the young man hurried his horse wantonly up the hill. On either side, between their low fences, spread the meadows of the Valley country—stubble and dry furrow, ditched and harvested fields, all first-class hunting land, with its deeps and curves and little knolls of forests like shadows over the hills, here and there.

“Of course, there’s just a chance that they may not pass,” Cynthia said. She could have borne it very well. But her companion was more sure.

“Oh, I guess they’ll come by all right!” He couldn’t imagine that he would be disappointed in that flying sight of *her*.

“Speaking of shooting,” John said with inadvertency, “Mrs. Bathurst gave me my first gun. I was a little shaver—it was twelve years ago.”

They rolled down one big hill and climbed slowly up the other, the horse breathing, the rustle of the wheels, the creak of the leather,

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and the song of the thills in their thongs an undertone to all they said. John told Cynthia the story of the auction at his old home in James Street. It was nothing but a boyish, quick, crude tale, without any embellishment, but under his words his romance lay, and its golden thread ran through the tale. It was unmistakable, even to this girl. The reins lay loose on the horse's back, the whip hung loose over the dashboard. John's head was bent, his eyes, smiling and intent, were fixed on some scene not in the Tallahoe meadows.

He talked out his secret, kept until now so jealously; he brought it before the girl's eyes until it was plain as day, and though told by a college boy in the simplest of terms, without diction or rhetoric, the story made a picture. Cynthia could see him with his little heart bursting as they auctioned off his father's gun; Cynthia could hear his sob as he shut himself up in his small bedroom; and Cynthia could see Mrs. Bathurst sitting on John's bed, in

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her spick-and-span dress, her hand lying white on the velvet brown of the corduroy hunting clothes.

"Wasn't it bully of her?"

"Yes," said Miss Forsythe gravely.

"I guess no woman ever gave a boy anything he wanted more. I can never forget how that gun in the corner of my room made me feel." He laughed softly to himself. "I don't doubt I made a fool of myself over it, I'm sure I hugged it. I can remember now how the wood shone on the handle. I've never really wanted anything since, you know," he said with young arrogance, "but it has been sure to come along sooner or later."

"You're a very lucky fellow."

The laugh went a little out of his voice as he thought of the much-wanted something which had never come. "I don't know about that. I suppose a man's luck has to change sometime."

John's story, which had brought him overwhelmingly to the one subject in which he was

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interested, and to the point of their drive, left him meditative. But it had the opposite effect on Miss Forsythe. As though she didn't want to give herself time to think of anything whatsoever, she now led the conversation to herself, and John, half listening, was pleasantly entertained. He rather liked her giggle, as Bathurst called it, and he liked her thoroughly, and as far as he could see anything else in the great white light of his infatuation, he saw this little candle throw its gentle beams.

"We'll stand here, I think." He drew the horse up on the hilltop. "They ought to come along out of that patch of woods about now."

A clear horn blast cut the air. The dogs flew out first, Peter Bathurst, Junior, followed, and half a dozen others seemed to shake out of the little woods and scatter over the fields.

Miss Forsythe, standing up in the buggy, cried, "There's Grace Cornwallis! Doesn't she ride like a breeze! She's the first of the women. I *do* hope she'll get in at the death."

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Peter Bathurst, Senior, came last; his horse had never hunted before, and he was in a fury with her.

"Here!" he cried, riding to the buggy, "help me fix this cursed curb, will you, Bennett? I didn't expect to get in at the death with this infernal cow I'm riding; but neither did I expect to have to stop and milk her in the middle of the fields. She can't go at all."

"Where," asked Cynthia eagerly, "are the others?"

"Nick's horse went lame, caved in at Moreland Farms, and my wife couldn't think of anything better to do than to drop out and stop over with him there. I guess they'll get lunch of some kind. They've telephoned for a trap to come for them, and they'll go right home. You'll come on over to luncheon at the Lewisons', you two, won't you?"

John set free the bit he was holding.

"I guess that's all right," and Bathurst started away as the last riders pelted from the



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woods and rode over toward the opposite fields.

For a moment the buggy with the two young people rested on the knoll, then John turned his horse about and, without asking the girl where she wanted to go, started home.

Cynthia wanted to go nowhere but where John should choose, and she sat back quietly, waiting for him to speak. It must have been a wait of over a mile.

The bitterness at his heart was cruel. The horse he drove, the reins he held between his knees, the lovely midday country on either side, the calls of the late birds, the peace and charm of the land as they drove through, the dear, kind little creature at his side, whatever joy and goodness there might have been in it all blotted itself out, and he suffered with jealousy at the thought of another man's wife in the company of yet another man. He couldn't help it; he didn't call up a lot of moral strength to fight against it; he was flying before

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it, and for some time he let himself chafe and suffer. No doubt he didn't understand her at all, this older, beautiful woman, who awakened as well his admiration and his chivalry. She knew life a great deal better than he did; she understood it; she knew what she wanted, and as far as he was concerned, of course, he wasn't in her consideration at all. No, there was no doubt about that. Why should he be? A bitter smile curved his young lips as he thought, and the brightness died out, leaving him pale and gray, the lines set and hardened.

He couldn't bear it, he wouldn't bear it. She loved hunting, she had said she did, she had talked about this meet for weeks, she was the best rider on the field, she had a bully horse, there was no reason why she shouldn't have got the brush, and she must have wanted the trial. Why should she knock off with that man and spend her hunting morning in a farmhouse with him? If her husband took it easily—well, that was Bathurst's business; as far

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as John Bennett was concerned he had no right to her, anyway; to her he was nothing but a foolish boy. It was none of his business, and he wasn't going to let it make him suffer like this; he was going to kill it right now. He wouldn't take it home and sleep with it another night, this unsatisfied, dreadful love. He was going to set himself free.

The idea of leaving Bathurst House in the morning with nothing to fill his mind, with nothing to help him in his sacrifice, was impossible.

"See!" Miss Forsythe broke in, "there ahead of us in the road is a squirrel. Isn't he pretty?"

Cynthia's hands were clasped in her lap, her charming face was as sweet as a brier rose. With a tremendous impulse, which he pushed on by all his force of character and by his great need of help and comfort and support, John said:

"I can't tell you how horribly I felt about last night, Miss Forsythe."

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The girl's face dyed a vivid scarlet.

"Please don't speak of it," she said.

"I will," John replied. "When I came out on Bathurst I felt like wringing his neck, and I didn't do anything but go back into the library and watch him drink, and then help him to his room; you see, I couldn't, that's the truth. He's been very decent to me, and the only thing I wanted to do is to get out of his house."

"Oh, really!" she exclaimed. "Do you feel so strongly as that?"

"Yes," said John. "I feel just that way, and I'm going to-morrow and no later."

She made no answer to this.

"Next week," Bennett went on, "I'm starting out West. As I told you before, I don't know whether you take any interest in it or not—I'd like to think you do—I'm going to start right in there to make some money. I've got a little opening, and I guess I can pull through."

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"Of course," Cynthia said, and he could hear that she was breathing fast. "Of course you'll pull through, you're that kind. You know you said that everything came your way you wanted."

Bennett started to speak, but just then, not very far distant, came the silver note of the hunting-horn. He gathered up his reins, spoke to the horse, touched him with the whip, and they flew along the road, scattering the squirrels to flight, turned a curve which brought them out to an open view, and there, a little below them, down over the valley from their little eminence, they saw the dots of scarlet, and the flying hunters pushing toward a single point.

"Poor fox!" Miss Forsythe said, "I think they've run him down."

"Do you know," Bennett said excitedly, "I believe we are at the kill. See, the whole lot of them are stopping there. Hear the dogs!"

She leaned a little forward, and stood up by his side, holding on to the buggy seat. As

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she stood so John Bennett turned about and looked up at her. It was very hard to find just the words. He might have said, "Look here, I want you to help me to pull my life straight." If he had done so Cynthia Forsythe would have understood.

John said, "Will you marry me?"

It was sudden and entirely unexpected. The words in all the world that Cynthia Forsythe wanted to hear were said by the right man. She stood firmly in the buggy, tightened her lips, and, incapable of making them say what she wanted, she only shook her pretty head.

Overwhelmed with surprise, John said, "Do you mean to say that you turn me down?"

The girl sank back on the seat from which she had just risen.

"Please don't ask me," she whispered. "Please—I must say no."

Nothing could have surprised him more. His first sensation was one of foolish anger, dreadful anger against her; then he remem-

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bered that she was a flirt. He had thought she loved him, that his suit with her was as good as won, that he had only to ask to make her marry him.

He started his horse, not once turning his eyes to the field or to the gathered hunters at the kill. They drove along for some time in perfect silence. The girl's heart beat so hard that John might have heard it. He heard nothing, however, but his own foolish resentment and wounded pride. Everything was against him, nobody wanted to have anything to do with him. For the first time a sense of unhappy discouragement came over his young heart. Tallahoe was a cursed place to him; he had made one dreadful blunder; he had fallen into a deplorable snare, and now he had made an ass of himself again.

These were his first feelings, and before he could follow them logically out and turn again and properly press his suit, as he should have done, they both heard behind them a call.

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Across Miss Forsythe's refusal came the charming voice of Mrs. Bathurst.

"Hello!" she cried gaily. "Hello, you two!" And the next moment she had ridden beside the buggy. In her scarlet coat and small hat she reined her horse directly by Bennett's side.

"I'll ride home with you, if you don't mind. Have you seen the meet? Wasn't it mean that I had to drop out? I thought I'd catch up, but it's too late now. Wasn't it a pretty sight?"

Bennett looked up at her, and her face, brilliant, sparkling, and her voice, made him with one great throb of his heart thank Heaven that the little girl at his side had "turned him down."

CHAPTER XIII

A CONFESSION

THERE was a hunt dinner that night at Bathurst house, and a ball, and young Bennett was the only man in a black coat—he wouldn't wear the pink because he had flunked the meet. As well, not dancing, he felt himself to be a rank outsider, but for nothing in the world would he have sneaked up-stairs and missed what sight he could get of his hostess.

He was grateful to Miss Forsythe for not coming down to the ball. He had learned from Peter, Junior, that she was "seedy" again and not to appear; otherwise, he had decided that the only decent thing for him to do would be to leave Tallahoe and go on to Buffalo. This, as he expressed it, would have made him wild; he wanted to see his hostess, and she was

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well worth looking at this night. The violet color of her gown became her well, its sheath of rich tone brought her firm white flesh into the fairest contrast. She wore pearls—pear-shaped drops of them in her ears, a collar of them with bands of diamonds, and there was a velvet sumptuousness, a regal look about her that every one of her guests admired. The Buffalo papers next day spoke of her as “queenly,” and mentioned that Worth had made Mrs. Bathurst’s dress for the hunt ball.

Nicholas Pynne, whom she had left to eat humble pie alone in the farm-house, when she had ridden off to join the young people in their buggy, said to her when they had finished dancing:

“I’m going back to Albany to-morrow, Virginia, and I’m not going to see you any more.”

“You’re rather a coward, my poor Nicholas.”

He smiled, not seeming to have heard her call him so.

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"At any rate, unless you send for me, I shan't be around again."

Pyrnne waited with her near the musicians, between the dances.

"Don't boast," Mrs. Bathurst said; "you must never say to the fountain, 'I won't drink of your waters.'"

"I shall not, however," Pyrnne repeated, "see you any more unless you need me, and then you know, Virginia, you have but to send the word."

"Tell me," she asked abruptly, "do you think that Peter has been flirting with Cynthia Forsythe?"

Nicholas shrugged without answering.

"She's been in a state of nerves, and although I've tried tactfully, I couldn't find out *what* was the matter with her!"

Her friend smiled. "Why, I told you the other night that she was in love with Bennett!"

"I'm responsible for her to her mother," she replied.

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"Nonsense, my dear lady! You can't turn a pretty girl of twenty loose and make a handsome woman of—"

"Don't mind me!" laughed Mrs. Bathurst. "I was afraid my husband had annoyed her."

And Nicholas said coolly: "I think it's more than likely that he has."

She flushed. "How horrid of him, how disgusting!"

Here the partner who was to dance with her crossed the floor. It was her husband, well-groomed, well-dressed, with the important swagger of the man who runs the show. He might well be proud of the leading lady, and he was proud of her, she was superb. He had been temperate at dinner in order to dance with her, and he was steady now.

As Prynne left them together, Bathurst said to his wife: "You wore that war-paint in the queen's drawing-room, didn't you?"

"I believe so;" her voice had several qualities in it, and the one she used for her husband

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Peter could flatter himself was all his own. She slipped her hand in his arm and crossed the room with him.

"Have you bothered Cynthia since she's been here, Peter?"

It was an unwelcome question, beautiful as she was, charming him as she did.

"Curse that blabbing fool!" he said brutally. "I'll kick him out of my house yet."

"Whom do you mean?"

"I mean that Bennett boy; he told you."

"He told me nothing—nothing. But it seems there is something to tell."

"Oh, don't get tragic!" he returned, shrugging. "I did kiss her, that's all, and Bennett saw me. Where's the crime?"

Controlling her disgust, his wife repeated: "If John saw you, he was too discreet to speak about it. It hasn't any importance, as you say. Cynthia couldn't hide the fact from me that something unpleasant had happened."

"Well," repeated Bathurst, twisting his

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mustache, "it *ain't* a crime, is it? You oughtn't to fill your house with pretty girls."

"It's not even worth a discussion," said his wife, "excepting that she's under my care."

"Well, she's nothing to me!" said the host brutally. "She's nothing but dough; they all are but you, and you don't think I'm fit to throw a bone to."

The waltz had begun. "Shall we dance?" he asked almost politely. And with anger against her beauty and her hauteur, and knowing that there was more than one man in Tal-lahoe who envied him, he put his arm around his wife and led her out on to the floor.

The dinner had been an early one and the dancing was short. As the household had had a strenuous day, the guests went early.

Bennett had sulked through the evening, giving himself up to his moods, watching the passing of the beautiful figure of his hostess, feeling miserable and disheartened. Early in the evening he went up-stairs to his room after

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bidding her good-by and thanking her, for he had determined to go away on the first train the following day. There was a cynicism in his voice, and a look of weariness on his face that at his age would have struck her as being almost droll if she had not thoroughly understood his state of mind.

He had barely closed his door for the night, going into the room where she had nursed him and where he had passed so many hours of real unhappiness, when a knock fell, and he threw the door open so wide and swiftly that it showed how well he knew the sound and how he welcomed it. Mrs. Bathurst was standing there.

"Let me come in a minute, won't you? I'm going to sit down and talk to you a bit."

Looking as though he would forbid her, the face of the blond young man flushed and his half-sullen expression did not change. Her frankness, her kind nod to him, her coming as she did when all the house was rustling by in

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the corridors to rest, her clear, sweet voice as she called him John showed how maternally she thought of him—like this she would have gone in to see Jack and Junior at the end of the day.

Mrs. Bathurst took her place in his big leather chair, over by his bureau, close to his outlay of simple toilet articles. As she talked to him her fingers touched the toilet-cover; one by one she lightly touched the little articles, the ebony button-hook, the shoe-horn. They were sacred to him from that night.

The dark folds of her lustrous dress fell about her on the floor. Against the chair her head melted into the shadow. There was a little light behind her and out of it her face and her white neck and arms gleamed.

"You haven't been quite frank with me."

Bennett stood rigidly before her. She was quite right there! Frank with her? "Jove!" he thought, "I wonder what she'd say if I should be frank!"

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"You don't mind my coming in, do you, like this, as I would go to Jack or Junior?"

He was able to assure her that he did not mind.

"You see, we've talked quite a lot about things together, while you were convalescing, and you took me into your confidence a little, didn't you? So you won't think I'm prying or curious—only friendly, if I want to know a little about your plans before you go? Sit down; let's talk for a quarter of an hour."

He took his place in the chair next hers and tried to listen to what she said, and to think of what she was saying. They had begun this day together; when she had come down-stairs she had found him in the mists of the morning. It seemed that they were going to close the day side by side. There was something awfully sweet about it.

"You've been too kind for anything," he managed to tell her, "and you know how I feel about it, every bit."

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"Oh, taking care of you was more fun than anything I've known for a long time," she answered affectionately, looking at him without the shadow of any feeling but pure kindness. "I played trained nurse pretty well, didn't I? I *loved* it! But I *don't* think you've been quite fair! I mean to say, you let me be an awful bore with my advice when you were ill—and all the time you were laughing in your sleeve!"

"Oh," the young fellow exclaimed, shocked, "I never did such a thing! I wanted to hear everything you thought. If I've had any plans they haven't been worth mentioning."

He was not the kind to make a dash for sympathy; his friend knew it. Sitting there before her, big and strong, his beautiful head well placed on young shoulders whose strength had never been tried, she thought of him as a boy—disappointed in first love, too proud to show his hurt.

"You're really going West, directly?"

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"I shall see Doctor Brainard, first, and talk with him." He gave a half-embarrassed laugh. "None of my plans is cast iron!"

"I wish you'd talk with Nicholas Pynne," Mrs. Bathurst suggested cordially; "he's an awfully good adviser."

"I wouldn't bother anybody; that western job's a sure thing for a fellow with a little capital. But it's perfectly bully of you to care," he added gratefully.

The door was open, and in the hallway he heard Jack and Junior go by, and the latter stuck his head in.

"Giving John a curtain lecture? You'd better listen to her, Bennett; she's a corker; and if she tells you not to, you'd better not! She knows!"

Junior withdrew his head and the curtain dropped its folds. His were the last steps to pass the door.

The lady asked a few practical questions about John's plans, questions which, with

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averted eyes, the young chap answered as well as he might. His mind was too overwhelmed by the consciousness of her to be lucid on any other subject. He was saying to himself: "In just about a minute she'll get up and go—she'll be gone."

And in a few minutes she rose. As he got up heavily out of his chair he raised his eyes to her, and she saw in them a dumbness of misery which she took to be his disappointed love for Cynthia Forsythe. She had not been able yet to bring herself to speak of the subject. John was too silent, he was too shy. Once or twice she had thought, "The poor boy hasn't known how to make love, that's the trouble."

There was a divine kindness in her face as she stood there, and he felt that he was a bore to be so silent before her, so unresponsive. She didn't dream the fiery struggle that was going on in him and that he was blind with the rush of his senses—deafened by the cry within him, and weakened with the effort to

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keep back from her ears the call of his young being. But he must speak or she would think him a fool.

"You've always been ripping to me, Mrs. Bathurst, ever since I was a little kid." He pointed over to the corner. "Ever since the night when father's gun stood there, behind the door."

She laughed. "Oh, dear," she exclaimed, "you've no idea how amusing you were, how funny. Why, you couldn't even thank me, you were as red as fire."

"As red as my hair, I guess," Bennett said, a little bitterly. "Well, I can't thank you now, either. You've been a perfect brick."

These were far from being the words which his heart suggested. These hurt him—they were wrung out of him; he had other things to say—things that came imperiously—words he didn't know before were in the vocabulary and that he had never used. He was being taught by passion. But he held and forced the

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endearments back, and put lame, clumsy phrases in their place. Always smiling, with the delightful little crinkles around her mouth and eyes and the cleft in her chin which John adored, Virginia Bathurst said: "You've nothing whatsoever to thank me for, John Bennett; I'm naturally glad you're well and able to go. But I'd like to feel that you went away happy. Of course, I know you'll be successful. I shall miss you."

He said "Oh," under his breath. The curtain fell before the open door, and though no sound whatsoever could be heard from his room in the hall, she had dropped her voice.

She came near him—put that beautiful hand of hers on the sleeve of his coat.

"My dear boy," she said very sweetly, "don't think I'm an awful meddler; and you haven't said a word to me, but I know you'll forgive my asking—"

He had never been so near her; things began to come true. The stuff which his daring

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imagination had cut into, the woof of his day-dreams and night dreams was beginning to be real. . . . Her dress held her lightly, it almost touched him; her lips, her arms, her bare, beautiful neck; the lines of her throat, her chin, the cleft in it, the rare bloom of her coloring, the perfume of her, the fragrance of her, the woman she was. "She smiled at me like that," memory said, "when I was a boy."

"I don't like to think you're having a hard time," she was going on, "but I don't want to intrude on your confidence, John."

He murmured: "I don't know what you mean."

No, he wouldn't look at her any more. The sense of her hand on his sleeve went to his very flesh.

"You see, Cynthia's here in my care and she's told me."

He broke the spell violently. "She did—did she? Well, that's all right."

His friend looked startled. "Why, you

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bear it splendidly. Of course you would. She's a dear, she's a darling; you know I wanted her for Jack, but of course we've given that up long ago. She's very young; don't give up hope, don't take this as definite."

The young man she was consoling said rapidly:

"Oh, but I do, I do take it definitely! She can't go back on her word now!"

His tone, his manner was so unexpected that her hand dropped from the arm of the inconsolable lover.

"Oh, you mustn't let it make you bitter, John. Why, just think how men have waited and—"

He thrust his hands behind his back and clenched them there.

"It doesn't seem to be any secret," he said, "since Miss Forsythe has told you. I did ask her to marry me and she refused, and I've never been so glad of anything in my life."

Virginia looked at him in despair; she had

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come warm from the confidence of the pretty girl who had cried in her arms.

"Why, you don't care for her!"

"Not a rap."

"Really!" She looked at him astonished.

"I was an ass," John said heartily; "I don't know why I made such a fool of myself! Of course, if she had accepted me I would have stood by, but I don't care a thing for any girl alive."

She laughed softly in spite of herself, the adorable laugh of a woman who knows life and understands, and who is amused by a fresh experience.

"Really, John, you're perfectly shocking. Why, you're a cruel flirt! You mustn't do such things; above all not with a girl like Cynthia."

And he agreed with feeling.

"You can bet I won't; the next girl might take me."

"I'm almost angry with you," she went on

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seriously, and then she stopped, for she didn't want him to think for a moment that Cynthia was unhappy. She put out her hand indulgently.

"Good night, you bad boy. I came to console you, I thought you were in the blues. I wonder if you are quite frank with me?" Then she added, "But I don't think you need me."

"I do need you."

He didn't know the voice that spoke, nor did Virginia, and she didn't know, as these words passed his lips, the man who stood in the place of John Bennett.

"I don't need anything else or want anything else."

She paled and looked at him startled; then, mistress of the situation, tried to smile. She put her hand on his shoulder.

"Foolish boy," she murmured, "foolish boy."

But the boy had gone, and the man, swayed by the passionate tide of life, the vast ocean rising in his heart, was not to be withstood.

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Without another word of protest he put his arms around her and poured on her face and eyes the kisses he had dreamed of, with all the ardor of his first love. He rained his kisses on her face, on her lips, her eyelids, and her lips again, and sighed as into a bed of flowers. Afterward—and here he lingered on the memory—he could not dream otherwise than that she bore his passion gently—gently! but as he feasted and murmured the words that called her dear, she made herself free, pushed him from her, and fled from him, leaving him dazed, bewildered, triumphant.

CHAPTER XIV

MEDITATIONS

MRS. BATHURST gained her own room and, sitting down on her divan, covered her face with her hands. Although there was no one to see her, and only the familiar objects of her own room were around her, she had the sensation of being acutely observed, and she blushed, and her eyes grew young again, like a girl's.

"I've never been so surprised in my life, never!" She laughed a little, and her laugh was tremulous, and she gave a long sigh.

"*John Bennett*, that little boy, that boy! How *dare* he? Why, he's mad! How perfectly ridiculous!"

So she spoke of it to herself, but her light words and this attitude of mind regarding her sudden whirlwind of experience were not

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the real emotions the young man's daring had roused. If it had been madness that had made him do what he had done, it was the sweetest lunacy, there was no doubt about it. As though she still felt the caresses that had rained on her, she passed her hand over her brow and cheek, over her neck, and flushed again. Her words to Nicholas Pynne on the horse-show grounds came back to her: "A red-headed boy! Why, he's a man, my dear Nicholas, a beautiful man!" And this was what John Bennett had grown to be; he had matured terribly, marvelously, and in the knowledge that he had showered on her the first love of his heart there was something so beautiful that her own heart thrilled. How wild of him! How bold of him! How dare he?

She would not see him again—he would go to-morrow at two o'clock.

"Of course, he'll write me a long letter. I foresee what it will be like, full of apologies, of prayers for pardon; he will think he has

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insulted me in my own house, he'll be dreadfully ashamed. Poor John!"

She had gone in to talk to him in the friendliest manner, to encourage him about Cynthia. She wanted to give him hope, and her consolation had not been needed. What a shocking flirt he was! Why, he didn't care at all for Cynthia. And now where she had said "Poor John!" she said "Poor Cynnie!" with greater enjoyment of the adjective.

The girl's image faded out, and nothing but John remained in the foreground, and stayed. She saw him as he sat before her in his room, with glowing eyes that eluded hers. They were a boy's eyes still. She had seen tears on those lashes years ago; she had watched them when Bennett was delirious at the Big Tree Inn, and she had then, in taking care of him, learned every line of the young face, every turn and molding of that beautiful head with its strong, close-growing hair, reddish at the ends, and the determined chin and the fresh

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lips. The face was a boy's face still. Of what had he been thinking as she had talked to him to-night? His reserve and his silence she had found disconcerting, and now, as she realized that all that time he had been thinking of her in such a manner, she glowed through and through.

She had done very wrong to go in on him like this; she had been wrong throughout in taking nothing but his youth into account, and he was evidently ages older than Jack and Peter, Junior. During their times together in his sick-room it had been a pleasure to talk to him. Simple as his mind was, poor conversationalist as he was, his tastes were so clean and vigorous, and she had planned for him and thought for him more than she knew.

He stood up before her now as she mused, like a youthful Adam, and there was a light about him, a radiance. She had thought he didn't know how to win Cynthia Forsythe, or how to make love. He wasn't the novice she

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had fancied. He had learned very perfectly and very suddenly. He had been like primeval man in his daring, and she was too real a woman not to be touched by his passion.

As she mentally approached a danger-point, John's altered voice seemed again to say to her, "*I do need you!* You're the only one I need." And the blood began to dye her throat and cheek. For half a second her heart rocked as though it were in a cradle, swung by the biggest forces of the world. She said aloud in her silent room, "No, John Bennett, you *don't* need me, and I'm the one thing in the world that you mustn't want—that you mustn't want."

She rose, as if she hoped by walking up and down the room very fast to dispel the dangerous emotions that were gaining way. She unfastened the jewels from her hair and neck and ears, and, denuded of her ornaments, looked defiantly in her dressing-glass.

"Heavens!" she confessed, "it won't be long

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before I'm an old woman. How ridiculous! Have I lost my last remnant of common sense? I ought to be ashamed of myself."

But, her jewels put aside, the bodice of her violet dress lying like a mass of flowers on the chair, the heavy skirt trailing across the sofa, half dressed, she fell once again to dreaming. She did not see her own beauty, reflected in the glass before her, for looking over her bare shoulder the young face of John Bennett was imaged. This was what his silence had meant, then! This was why he was always at her side. She remembered that he had threatened to ride for the sole reason that it might arouse her interest, and continued to remember with amused tenderness the manifold indications of his growing sentiment.

Only last year she had told herself that she was sick of sentiment, that there wasn't a man in the world who could rouse any feeling in her but disgust. Her life with her husband, the series of flirtations in Europe, the courting

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of men of the world, the stale eternal phrases, they had palled on her; they all had said the same thing more or less well. She was a woman made to win men's admiration and to arouse desire, and now, on her return, Nicholas, with his old fidelity, had renewed his old suit. She had felt like a cliff against which the waves had beaten for a long time, and their touch and their song were cold to her, and now suddenly all the landscape promised to burst into the bloom of May, the cliff's sides to adorn themselves with bloom, and the sea, like a summer sea, smiling, beautiful, promised to mirror the flowers.

"He must not love me," she said. "If he really loves me, he must cease to do so." And she tried to think of it as only the natural outcome of his long propinquity to her, as a passing fancy that would soon die away.

"He will go to-morrow; I won't answer his letter. There'll be the question in his mind that he has offended me, then he will forget."

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But the persistence of her remembrance of those last few moments in his room forced her, frightened her into knowing that John Bennett did more than fancy her, and that not only passion ran through those furtive, seeking, wonderful caresses, but love. Here again she put one hand above her eyes. "Oh, dear!" she murmured like a girl, "why, it's quite terrible, isn't it? If he really is going to begin like this, where will he end, poor dear? He knows so wonderfully how to care."

What had she been thinking of? How blind she had been! Why, she had been culpable toward him, culpable. Of course, she wouldn't make a tragedy out of it. Her husband kissed girls under her roof, John had kissed many a girl before; and, singularly enough, it didn't amuse her to think about it, although she knew perfectly well he had never given himself like this. Still, she wouldn't even make a point of it. He would go, and she would laugh at him, figuratively, and it would all be over.

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Of course he would conquer and win new fields, and marry—marry soon—

A bitter smile came to her lips, and here her reverie brought her up to the one thing she wanted to avoid, her own part of it. If she could only forget herself now, leave, dismiss the thought of John Bennett and his young ecstasy, really laugh at it, be indulgent, pardon—if such a word were in the case—and forget. . . .

Virginia sighed, and, rising from her toilet table, completed her preparations for the night.

But before she could decide to put out her light, the musing woman found that she was absolutely called on to reckon with this horrid self that, unless it is forgotten, keeps the human being from peace. She confessed now that she had been thinking about John Bennett for weeks; she had been selfish with him and she had mentally and sentimentally kept him to herself. Here was a lovely girl under her roof with whom he would undoubtedly have fallen

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in love if he had not been brought into contemplation of the older woman's more subtle charms.

But this, her own condemnation of her conduct, of her thoughtlessness, possibly, was not what she dreaded—she was a big-hearted, large-minded woman, and could pardon others and pardon herself. That wasn't the question. Nothing in her life had been so dear as the nursing of John Bennett. No presence under her roof had been so bright and so dear to her as his. She had never had a child, and he didn't seem like a son, but the charm of his youth, of his good looks and his dearness had made her forget all about the son she used to long for; he made her happy. That was the truth of it; it had made her happy to have him there, and, although there wasn't a moment when she had acknowledged it, nothing had made her happy at all for years and years and years.

She sat on her bed in her white dressing-

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gown, her arms folded across her lovely breast, the stillness of the night around her, and there wasn't a line of her, a bit of her, not beautiful and not made for love.

"He will go to-morrow very early. I shall be very angry with him and I shall never see him again; I shall try not to see him again. Why, I'm almost old enough to be his mother—and what am I going to do when he is finally gone!"

Now she had brought herself up face to face with something she wanted to say before she tried to sleep. "What is he thinking now? What is he doing now?" But she couldn't linger with those thoughts. "I let him kiss me, I didn't resist, I submitted to him. What in Heaven's name does he think of me?"

She put out her hand and touched the light's button and the welcome darkness came between her and John Bennett's thoughts, whatever they might be.

As the kind cloak fell across the room and

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on her white figure and on her white bed where John had gazed with such emotion a few nights before, all was blotted out in the darkness. Still she huddled musing there: "That boy, that boy!"

Being never a woman of aimless meditations, being a strong woman and a very real one, unwilling to meet the problem which her senses put before her, unwilling to let herself relive again those moments in John's arms, that now in the darkness and the night promised to be a time of temptation sweet as it was dangerous, Virginia Bathurst, with a mighty will, thrust the memories back, back, bravely, finely, and well. And she refused to answer the great big question that pounded at her heart. She couldn't cope with that question to-night, neither could she admit the figure of the man from whom she had run away. She could not let John Bennett, big, beautiful John Bennett, in; neither could she do without him.

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She smiled in the darkness and her smile was bewitching. If she could have seen how the crinkles came around her lips and her eyes!

"Foolish, foolish boy," and the word was a wand by which she made to reappear the little red-headed boy who stood between the curtains in James Street house, who looked at her with his eager eyes. So she saw him again, and she had then known his heart and what he yearned for, and she had decided to give it to him, if it took a gold mine! Little John Bennett came and sat beside her, grown fairy-like, adorably small and safe, and she could turn her lovely face toward him without fear. Between them lay the corduroy hunting clothes, and her hand rested on them and Virginia Bathurst cried out to the vision:

"John Bennett, John Bennett, why did you grow up? Why didn't you stay a little boy? Now that you *have* grown up—I don't know what is going to happen to us both!"

CHAPTER XV

THE WOMAN-HATER

THE soil of the state in which John Bennett found himself and where he was to strike his roots deep, if he expected to have any kind of a harvest, was strange ground to him. But he was an American and therefore a citizen of the world, and he took his place quickly. He bought a half interest in a lemon ranch in the valley near Santa Barbara, and cast his luck with a man from Boston, Bob Furniss.

Any one to have seen Bennett standing between the doorway of the bungalow and the lemon groves, in his riding breeches, his loose white shirt, his sombrero under his arm and his shining head bare—any one to have seen him standing so in a clear bright light, whist-

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ling as he viewed his orchard, would never have thought him a victim of hopeless love.

His chum found him good company: an all-round sport, sympathetic in every point of view but one. He was not sympathetic on the topic of women. Furniss couldn't interest his partner in this subject. The other man claimed to be a woman-hater.

The new partner of Chiluvista was five years younger than Furniss, who had his own affairs of the heart to occupy him and who learned to keep his confidence to himself, for Bennett was a very poor audience.

One night as the two men sat out in the lucent dusk, the Bostonian, who prided himself on his tenor voice, sang bravely out into the stillness of the evening:

“Believe me, if all those endearing young charms.”

In spite of the singer's enthusiasm and his

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theatrical phrasing of the old song, at the end Furniss said :

“Bosh! Go out into the grove there and curse, Johnny. You’re a heathen. Jove, but some woman must have turned you down hard!”

His companion replied vaingloriously: “Let me tell you that no woman ever said no to *me* in her life!”

“It would have done you a rattling lot of good if she had, I dare say,” retorted Furniss. And John stalked off, his figure soon lost among the silver-leaved, pale-fruited trees.

The pungent air of the groves had sickened him at first with its sweetness, and everything had been bitter and hateful when he came out to Chiluvista. He felt himself an outsider, and a man doomed to be unhappy from his youth.

Before a month had gone by that very youth had rebelled and Bennett regained his balance with rather a discomfoting ease! He hated to acknowledge that he took real pleasure in

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life, or in his riding and his work, and in making a success of his venture, but surely and kindly the air into which he breathed love sighs began to make him new again.

Nevertheless, the woman-hater, in spite of his undamaged health and spirits, was a lover such as Bob Furniss would never be in all his practical life.

The boy had gone mad on one subject, and he would rather have cut down the luscious groves with their mellow balls before their time and have starved on a pile of the rotting fruit than have let Furniss guess his malady.

The journey west, the long train travel in which he had been carried like an inanimate parcel, his arrival at Santa Barbara, his meeting with Furniss, his rapid bargain, his settling at the ranch, all had been performed by a man enveloped in a mist of excitement, hardly conscious of the material world.

A fortnight or so went by before he really woke up, and very early one morning, tired of

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lying staring at the gaining light, he threw on his clothes and went outside and looked around.

Like a forest of elfin trees—silver trees where the pale fruit looked argent and the leaves folded them around mistily, the lemon groves stretched in regular squares and oblongs. There was a fortune in this vegetable checker-board. Bennett and Furniss would be rich if they waited long enough and had patience enough. When he was a rich lemon grower, would she care?

Their Mexican boy was rubbing down a new horse in front of the stable shack, in the open. Bennett put his hand on the warm, soft nose.

“Is that the mare Mr. Furniss bought yesterday? Got any name? Call her Ladybird.”

In this way he re-created the horse he had wantonly killed on that day, and himself came to life with the new Ladybird. A little later he sent this mare to Mr. Bathurst, and made the gift so graciously that the gentleman actually accepted it without protest and was pleased.

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But he never wrote to his lady, who waited for the boyish apology in vain, for he didn't ask to be forgiven. He had gone away in all his triumph; and if she remembered him at all she was obliged to remember him as an ardent delinquent.

He didn't deny himself the pleasure of thinking of her in his exile, and he took her with him everywhere. In the clear atmosphere of Chiluvista she moved between the lines of lemon groves, rode with him over the country on a horse by his side; she was like a girl with him, the difference in their ages entirely vanished; sometimes, drawing near in his fancy to this visionary woman, the young man saw that she had become so much of a girl that she almost lost the resemblance to Virginia.

It was long before he forgot how he had held her in his arms, and it broke his heart at the end of two years to find that he couldn't *quite* recall the perfume of her gown and that the memory of the subtle scent had become

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as faint as flowers on a distant height whose breath is only brought by some captious breeze.

The young men's post was brought by the Mexican boy at supper time. There was one woman servant; but Furniss was vain of certain dishes that he cooked well, and he had prepared a savory stew and hung affectionately over the steaming dish waiting for John to come to supper.

When he appeared and finally threw down the letters, Bob put his hand authoritatively over the pile.

"Now you're not going to look into those until we are through with grub. It will be the end if you begin on these."

But his partner had torn a newspaper open and Furniss saw the color leave his tan, then rush back again until the young man's temples beat; the sheet shook in his hand. He crumpled it up and thrust it in his pocket.

Then he sat down to feed.

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In the night the Bostonian was wakened out of a sweet slumber by his companion calling to him:

"Say, old man, I want to put something straight I said to you to-day."

"What the deuce," growled the other, "are you waking me up for?"

And his friend returned imperturbably, "I told you no girl ever turned me down, didn't I?"

Furniss rolled over.

"Well, it was a lie; I'd forgotten when I said that. The only girl I ever asked to marry me turned me down."

Furniss was breathing happily; he had fallen asleep again, but Bennett went tranquilly on: "I wanted to set it straight, old man, I had to set it straight."

He lay on his narrow bed, his arms above his head, smiling into the dark. He wasn't thinking of Cynthia Forsythe and his proposal in the buggy; he was seeing with a painful

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vividness the older woman, the beautiful Mrs. Peter Bathurst. He saw her pearls in her hair and around her throat, and the violet dress; he found now that he could perfectly recall its touch and its perfume, as he could recall the sweetness of the woman and the sense of her. He held out his arms with a low cry in the dark.

The next day, without any hesitation, John's partner found and opened the newspaper which the young man had left in his room. One whole page of the supplement was devoted to the picture of the celebrated Mrs. Peter Bathurst at Newport, whose husband had just been elected to congress. Indifferent as such portraits usually are, this one was successful: the pose was queenly, the face was alluring, and Bob Furniss saw and felt the charm which had made men Virginia's slaves all through her life.

"Woke me up at three A. M. to gas to me," he grinned. "Talked about the other girl.

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Mrs. Peter Bathurst, of Syracuse. Why, that's Bennett's own town. Poor Johnny," he laughed, "poor old Johnny. He calls himself a woman-hater!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE PRESENTIMENT

MRS. BATHURST, after passing the day on the yacht where her husband offered lobster, terrapin and champagne to a foreign prince, came back to Newport alone by the tender, for she had promised to ride before dinner with a friend.

All the way in, all the way up to the Belfries, as the Bathurst place was called, all during the time when she was dressing for her ride, and later, as she rode beside the Englishman, she had a singular feeling of elation, a presentiment of some awfully good luck. She told the Marquis of Penhaven about it, and took the augur to be all for herself.

"If you're in such good spirits," said the marquis, "why don't you give me a little happiness?"

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"I'm riding with you," Virginia replied.

"Unless it ends the way Browning's poem does—"

And she interrupted him: "For Heaven's sake, don't ask me to end anything of Browning's!"

They had finished their ride and were on their way back to the Belfries, and in a few moments would come in full cry of their kind. The marquis leaned over to his companion and put his hand on the pommel of her saddle. "Won't you give me one bit of hope? Give me," the Englishman persisted, "the right to go away happy."

Virginia listened almost eagerly, because she hoped to hear in what he was saying some sound which would tell her that the delight which the day seemed to promise her was about to declare itself, then she suddenly pushed his hand away. There was nothing in what he said out of the commonplace. She shook her head and spoke to her horse, and the English-

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man, as he set the animal free, said savagely: "I hope that Bathurst will drink himself to death."

"If he did," Bathurst's wife responded tartly, "it wouldn't make the least bit of difference between us. Please don't speak to me of this again."

In the ride home there was nothing; there was nothing in the brisk pace of their horses that fetched them to the door of the Belfries, to justify Virginia's exuberance. The fact that she was making a man unhappy did not cloud her sense of something good to come; "the song of a secret bird" sang deliciously deep down in her heart.

They crossed the big hall of the Belfries, where several groups of her guests and visitors sat around the tea tray, and the Marquis of Penhaven left her side. Without going upstairs to bathe and dress, she went through the wide-open door of the porch, which framed a picture of the sea, and below the gray rocks

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the waters spread away, a white yacht here and there, like a midsummer butterfly on a shining field.

There was a fresh breeze, and Virginia, with her face turned toward the water, drank in the salt perfume. The air touched her gently on the brow and cheeks; she breathed in with delight the peerless evening, warm with late summer yet with autumn vigor on the wings of the wind.

Down the far end of the porch, as she raised her eyes, she saw a man standing, looking, as she looked, out on the water. His back was to her; he was bareheaded, his feet were set well apart, his head thrown back. There were several tall men in Newport, with shoulders like Atlas. Virginia wondered which one of the young fellows this was, then realized that there was but one head like *that* in the world!

She went quickly down the porch to the visitor, and when there was not more than two feet between them she had had time

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to undergo her sequence of emotions. She heard him speak to her and she gave him her hand.

"Hello, John Bennett!" She tried to laugh, and found that she couldn't quite make it as natural as she wished to. "How d'you do; where did you come from? Do the boys know you're here? Whom have you seen?"

"Nobody. I came out here to wait."

"Till some one discovered you?"

"Yes, till you did."

She could laugh now and had her voice in hand. *This* was the happiness! *This* was the prophecy! *This* was what had come with her all the way in from the yacht!

"How long have you been here?"

"About ten minutes."

"I've been riding," she nodded. "Do *you* still ride?"

"I've almost lived on a horse for two years."

"How brown you are, how *thin*! How old you've grown! How you've changed!"

She was aware that he had not let her hand

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free. She drew it away and began to settle her stiff cravat and her hair. She took off her hat and swung it on her arm. She bared her head without coquetry, knowing that around the brows there were little touches of gray.

"Do you know I haven't heard a word from you in two years?"

"Yes," he answered, "but I've brought all that mail with me. I'll read it to you some day!"

"Tell me now. . . . I believe you've got some secret to tell."

She was taking him in as she smiled at him, as though he had been a sailor boy just home after a long cruise; she looked at him as though she wanted in one glance to read in his sun-burned face and in his eyes the romances of every port.

His eyes were blue as the sea, and a perusal of the clear bright face was so devoid of result, the curve of his beautiful lips, the lines of his face told her so little, that she exclaimed

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humorously: "I believe you've been in prison, or else that you're married."

Bennett replied: "I've been in prison all right, although it was a big open-air one. As the boys must have told you, if you cared to ask, I've been West on my lemon ranch all this time. You ought to know my partner; he's a winner, Bob Furniss, from Boston. I want to tell you all about it," he said eagerly, "from start to finish. It's such a bully riding country—" John came close to her. "It's been a prison, but, though I could, I didn't dare come out of it. I never rode but I wanted you to ride there with me; I never took a breath of that splendid air but I wanted you to breathe it too."

He had taken both her hands in his big tanned hand, with the rough callouses of the reins across it. Her hand seemed to sink in his like snow and to melt there. . . .

"I ran away like a coward and a thief. I didn't want you to forgive me, so I didn't

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write; but all these months I've been living for
—for—”

He didn't know how to press his advantage, he was too new in love; her rising color, her frown cut his words short.

“You'd better go back to your prison, John Bennett, and to your ranch as soon as you can.”

But as he set her hands free he laughed gaily, triumphantly, and the note of joy made her tingle; for this sound had every element of that happiness for which she had been waiting all day.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PRODIGAL

DOCTOR BRAINARD was taking a short vacation at his farm some sixty miles up-country. There had been much typhoid in Syracuse, and he felt the long siege and the close battles with life and death, and he was glad to get away.

He loved to put on a flannel shirt and a straw hat and make hay with his men. It was a second crop, and he reveled in the sunny August atmosphere and in the peace of his short vacation. Cut off from the town by telephone, five miles from the post, Doctor Brainard used to say that he ran up here like a coward to get away from people who really needed him.

He had been living this primitive existence for several days, smoking a pipe or a good

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cigar on the front porch of the rude farmhouse, and going to bed with the birds. He took no medical books up to Home Farm, but vegetated and dreamed at his ease in his arm-chair in his little parlor. He had put the piano in the best place in the house. He liked it better up here in the country than he did in Syracuse. At Home Farm there were no memories to jostle it, no one had ever been out here at the red farm-house who could make him jealous of Mrs. Bennett. He never opened the instrument; it stood closed just as he had bought it on the day of the auction. But on this evening, after finishing his cigar, he got out the key and unlocked the case and stood for some time looking down at the keys until they blurred before his eyes.

The hay had been cut that afternoon and the perfume came in sweet and warm, redolent with clover, and across the shorn meadows he heard the men and women laugh and call, going home.

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The childless bachelor had done his best for the son of the woman he had faithfully loved all his life. Standing by the open piano, he waited now for the young man to arrive. The buggy had gone "over town" to fetch him, for a day or two before John had wired that he wanted to come out and make a visit at the farm.

The doctor's personal reveries had been agreeable, but he didn't follow them on, but gave himself up to thinking about John, whom he hadn't seen for two years; and since John had come suddenly East he had written the doctor only once, to ask him for a considerable loan of money. This was only the other day, and John had been East some six weeks.

From where the doctor stood he could see the road wind across the flat country between the harvested fields, and caught sight of the buggy bringing John from the station, as it first declared itself a speck, and then growing larger, finally rattled in at the gate and drew

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up by the barn. The young fellow got out, bigger, more tremendous than ever, and Doctor Brainard, who was a small man, felt overpowered.

"Hello, Doctor," the visitor wrung his friend's hand hard. "Lord, but it's good to smell that hay! And isn't it a bully evening?"

After supper, when he had wandered over the farm, seen the live stock, had the horses he liked best led out and looked over, when the doctor had observed him furtively, looked him over and made a mental note of "decided nervous excitement" taken in his embarrassed nonchalance, his altered ways, his undoubted manhood, the two went together to the parlor, where candles had been put on the open piano and where the servant had placed a mass of sweet peas in a bowl.

"Sit there," the older man ordered, as he might have told John to do when he was a boy and home on his vacation. He made him sit

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with his red head and his handsome young face against the light.

"Well," said the doctor pleasantly, "you came East suddenly, didn't you? But you're doing well on the ranch?"

"Pretty well."

"How did you leave things there?"

"Pretty good shape."

The curt sentences did not frighten Doctor Brainard.

"But you didn't think the venture was all that you expected? What was the matter?"

"It isn't the ranch that eats up things. I wanted this advance that I asked you for for myself."

The young man sat on the window-ledge, his hands around his knee. His friend remembered the spendthrift gentleman of whom this was the son, and wondered how the boy's father would approach this affair of extravagance.

The doctor cleared his throat. "You know

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you haven't got an income to stand the strain you're putting on it."

"I'm much obliged for the loan, sir," said John evasively.

"You've been going the pace, I guess," but the doctor smiled so affably as he said the words that his hearer accepted them agreeably, and returned: "Well, I've been running on pretty well, Doctor."

"What is it, my boy? Cards?"

John hesitated.

"Oh—little of everything! I've played a lot of bridge, I've bought some horses, and it costs to live."

"It costs *me*," his friend replied, "just four thousand dollars a year to run the farm and my town house; it cost your father thirty to forty thousand, and he died a hundred thousand in debt. I hoped very much that you had set out on a different plan. But not to seem to preach to you, for after all I'm nothing but a friend, does this loan clear up things?"

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"Not by ten thousand dollars."

And here the young man got up and went out of the room as if to avoid the doctor's exclamation.

He leaned against one of the piazza posts, where the honeysuckle vine wound its green leaves and hung its yellow bugles. As though nothing had broken into their conversation of a few moments since, when Brainard finally came out, John said:

"I've been using my capital right along till now. I haven't got anything left but the ranch."

The older man, who had been mowing all afternoon with his men in the hay-fields and had felt only a delicious weariness, now experienced a sense of burden, a great fatigue crept over him.

John, by the honeysuckle vine close to the post of the porch, straight and vigorous, did not carry any perceptible burden, for it appeared to have shifted over to the older shoul-

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ders, and when the doctor spoke again his voice was keen.

"I suppose that I don't understand the set of people you've been going with. Gamblers filch you at their own tables, that's accepted. But these people whose incomes are limitless let a poor young fellow like you go along with them, share their extravagance—"

John turned sharply: "For God's sake," he exclaimed, "drop it, Doctor. They haven't anything to do with my extravagance; it's none of their business what I spend, and if I want to go with them, it's my own affair. Jack Bathurst asked me to go on a yachting trip of his as his guest—they had to charter a new boat, as theirs is being overhauled—and I insisted on sharing the expenses."

The doctor stared at him; he took his glasses off.

"*My word!*" he exclaimed. "Why, it doesn't cost less than fifteen thousand to run such a yacht for a few months."

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"Just about that," said the young man magnificently.

"A seventh of your fortune."

"Yes."

And this time the doctor turned and walked into the house.

The magnificent prodigal, with more or less serenity, smoked by the honeysuckle vine, then went down the path to the kitchen garden and across the fields to the spring-house. He had especially loved this corner as a boy. Cool and deep and vocal and delicious, the caressing gurgle over the stones of a shallow brook caught his ear and gave him the same old thrill. With its borders of cress and of spearmint holding it round like a bouquet, the pool settled and made its icy bowl. Across its limited surface John saw the moonlight drift, and while he stood there the harvest moon, yellow as butter, golden as a metal globe, hung over Home Farm.

John sat down on the grass, the farm-house,

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warm and secure, back of him, the pool at his feet. He didn't think at all about the doctor, whom he had pained and shocked and troubled; to his own tangled affairs he didn't give a second of thought. Above his young head the moon seemed to spin in the heavens, a bird called clear in the small forest at his hand, where he had hunted as a boy and dreamed of jungles. He drew his breath with delight at these happy memories. It would be the hunters' moon the following month, and he would hunt with her, not forty miles away. This time he wouldn't follow the scarlet coat as he had done before, like a timid and suffering fool—he would know better how to live.

Memories of the yachting trip, just over, came hard and fast on him—heavenly days and nights as beautiful as this—and he kept his recollections company until he realized that he was sitting there alone in the grass, and he sprang up with something like a cry of pain.

As he came back lazily toward the house, he

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heard some one playing at the piano. There was no one there when he came in, though the candles burned in their sticks and a sheet of open music stood on the rack. John didn't know that Doctor Brainard played.

The sheet of music read, "From Alfred Brainard to Mary Poole." Why, that was his mother's name and this had been her piano! He remarked it for the first time and remembered that Doctor Brainard had bought it at the sale.

He stood before the old rosewood, laid his hand caressingly on the stained keys and for the first time thought of his mother with tenderness; his love for another woman made him now approach all women in his mind with the worship of a lover. The song on the rack was the one his partner at Chiluvista had everlastingly been humming.

"Believe me, if all those endearing young charms."

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John began very softly to play the opening chords. He fingered the page through. With the last note Doctor Brainard came back, looking tired and pale.

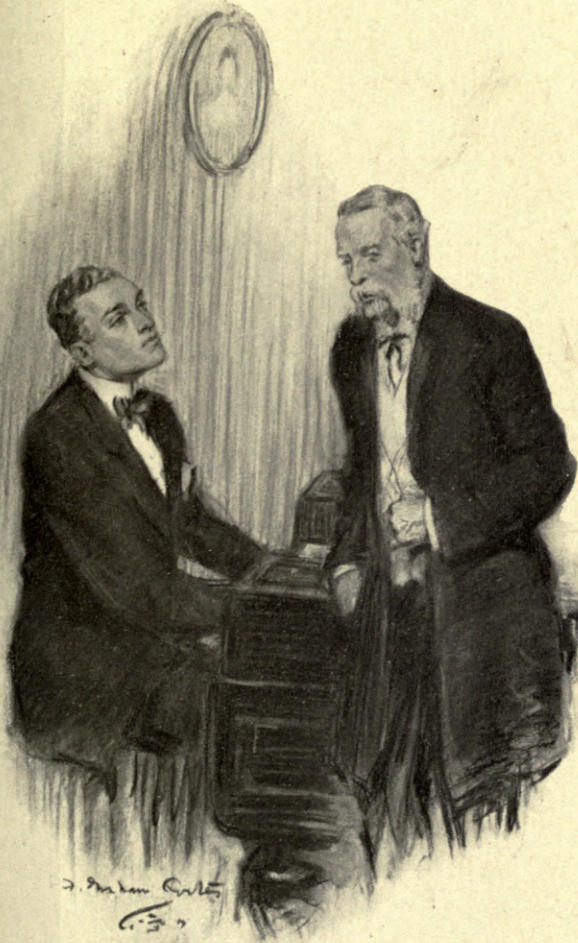
"I guess we ought to be saying good night," Bennett said with compunction. "These aren't farm hours, are they, Doctor?"

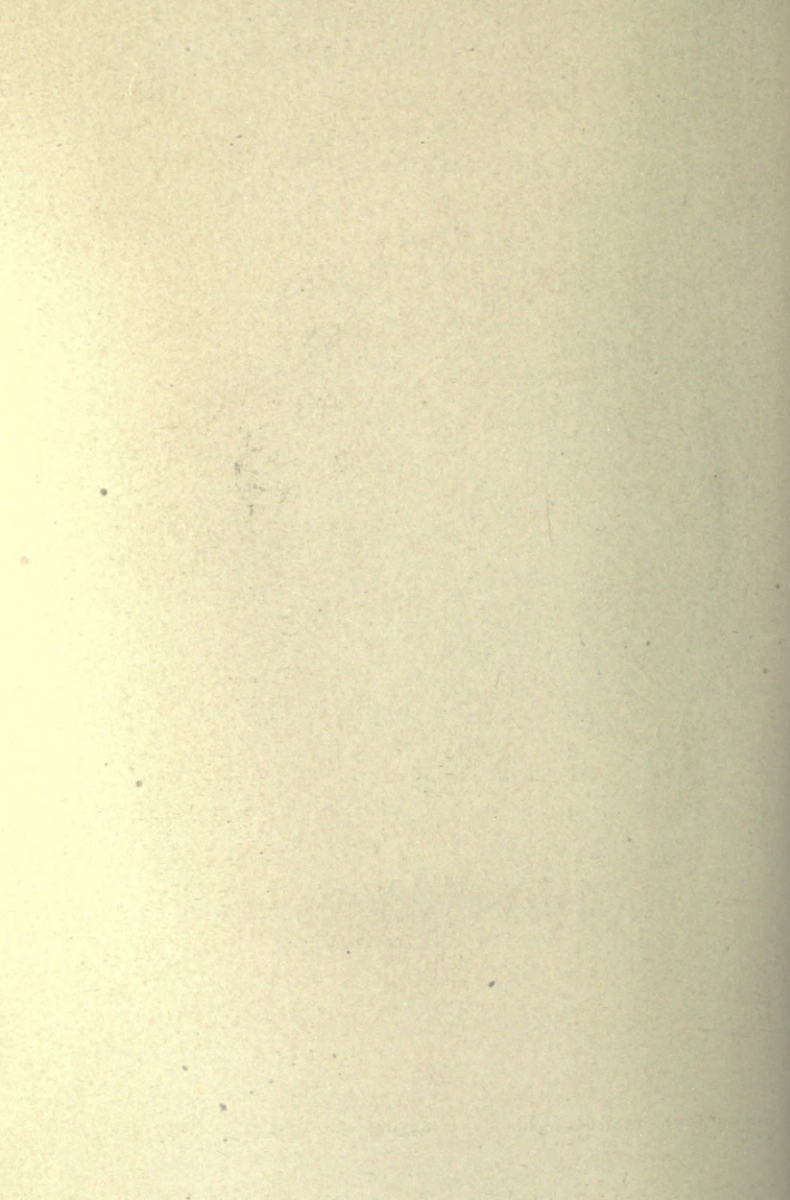
"I've been haying to-day and I'm stiff as a poker. Your old room is all ready and the lamp is lighted. There are screens in the window and you'd better keep them down. If you'll put your clothes and boots out on a chair, the girl will brush them for you."

Doctor Brainard took his guest in from his boots to his bright head.

"You kicked the footboard out of your bed the last time you slept there, John! We never put it back, so I guess you'll have length enough. Good night."

The guest, bending his tall head under the low door, went out; the doctor closed the piano, folded up the song, and locked the in-





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strument. He was a sentimentalist. There had been quite enough sacrilege on this night.

Just before his ward came in the doctor had surprised his servant girl with her hands on the keys, picking out a tune; and now John had played his mother's song through.

The doctor shut the window and bolted it, closed the front door and locked it, and went up-stairs to bed.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RECKONING

JOHNN stayed ten days at Home Farm, and Doctor Brainard left him to his own devices. Every morning the hired man took the post in and carried with him a bulky letter, written by the young lover. It had been easy, so fascinatingly easy to cover page after page. In older days, in colder days, how Bennett envied the power and force that created those words, how he yearned for it and with what jealous regret! He could have written all day long. Instead, he took his passion out of doors and walked with it, its magnificent sunny presence like an angel at his side.

He lay under the haystacks and read and planned, and even began to rhyme and to make verses. Everything that made him think of

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his finances he thrust away with irritation; he wouldn't open Furniss' letters, and they lay on his table with his bills. During the ten days at Home Farm he never had one letter from Mrs. Bathurst. But then, he hadn't dared hope she would write to him; in a few days the whole Bathurst family would be in Tallahoe, and he was booked to visit there.

The present John Bennett was very much warped; he was out of line with part of his nature and in perfect step with the sentimental part. No young man in love is ever balanced. The lunacy of love and its delirium all belonged to him now, and there wasn't an object on any part of the globe that didn't revolve under the sun of one woman's face; everything else was in the dark. To John there was but one pole, the universe hung loose from it.

During the ten days of his ward's stay Doctor Brainard found that he had a very acute case to study. He found himself saying once, "Thank God, he's not my own son!" After he

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had said this he discovered he didn't feel any the less badly for the assertion.

Bennett delighted in doing over all the things he had done at Home Farm when he was a boy.

Coming in from a long day's fishing upstream, his big boots high on his thighs, his rod hanging over his shoulder, a flapping straw hat on his red head, he gave his straw basket to the hired girl, who would have cooked a whale for him if he had brought it in, and sat down on the porch like a farmer's lad. The doctor, not quite so limber as his ward, sat down more stiffly on the low step.

When they had both lighted their pipes, Brainard asked John: "What are you going to do?"

The young man turned; his face had the look of the morning on it, there wasn't a line of care. As he looked then, some young god might have looked just before he went to his mistress.

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"Going to run down to New York to-morrow for a few days, then I guess I'll go on over to the Valley; I'm asked to stay there in several places."

"I meant what are you going to do about your business affairs?"

A slight wrinkle came over John's brow. Until he found that he hadn't another dollar in his pocket he would go on still hoping that he might discover some bunch of unlooked-for greenbacks in his top drawer.

"Guess I'll have to sell out to Furniss." He serenely accepted his fate.

After a slight pause the doctor said meditatively, "I remember the time when you wanted to hire out as an errand boy at Hickson's. And for a first-rate reason," the doctor went on. "You had a sort of fine pride; you didn't want to be patronized. Your father was a spendthrift, he spent his money like a prince, but for some reason or other he always seemed to be acting the host."

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His auditor stirred uneasily, and then asked :
"Do you mean that you think I sponge?"

The doctor found that he was as sensitive as a woman before his task.

"To go about with millionaires everywhere takes a large income. You have a very small one." He looked down at the young fellow's feet. John had drawn off his big boots. "Those stockings," Brainard thought himself very keen, "didn't cost you a cent less than two dollars a pair."

Bennett's conscience gave him a twinge. They had cost him six dollars, and he had a dozen or more pairs of them.

"And I dare say," the doctor went on, "that your general expenses are about on the same scale. We're both men here together, and I wasn't born yesterday, if I am an old bachelor."

The brightness died out of John's face.

"Have you your bills with you?"

"The whole bunch." And he remembered the day when at school he had carried in his

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pocket the florist's bill and his tailor's bill, and how the doctor had come suddenly to tell him about his inheritance.

"Money certainly is the deuce," John murmured, and he took his pipe out of his mouth and looked at it hopelessly, as if his own fortunes were contained in the little bowl.

"In a lump sum, how much do you owe, John?"

Bennett told him.

"How much have you left of your capital?"

The young man cleared his throat, took a whiff at his pipe, which had gone out. He turned about and laughed.

His friend's pipe was still red, and the doctor smoked in the lingering sunlight, his eyes on the peaceful fields. The man washed the buggy in front of the barn door; the water splashed on the whirring wheels; John's fish was frying in the kitchen, and the odor of soda biscuit browning in the oven, came out, fragrant and tempting.

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"The ranch," Bennett said—"that is, my share of it—will more than pay up everything I owe you, Doctor Brainard."

"I dare say. I expect it's a little too soon to ask you what you've got out of all this sort of thing."

"Lord," John tried to face the music. "A fellow has got to live, a man must see the world."

"Costs a great deal to go around it," said the doctor. "There have been men who thought they had done it in eighty days. I'm twice your age, and I don't pretend to have seen much more than Home Farm."

His eyes grew small under his heavy brows; he could not but think as he spoke of how complete the world would have been right here—if—!

Mary Poole's son got up, and with a good deal of dignity for one who had nearly ruined himself and borrowed money, he said: "It doesn't make so much difference what I've got

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out of it just now, Doctor, does it? I'm only twenty-six."

"No," returned the older man slowly, "you can't, of course, weigh everything against money."

The physician knew very well the set in which his ward had been seeing life; most of the people were his own patients, some of the men were inebriates, most of the women had nerves. "Have some of my tobacco." He held out his pouch.

The young man filled up and lighted his brierwood.

"Do you know any real nice girl you could marry?"

His ward roared. "Marry! I'm never going to marry, Doctor. I wouldn't marry the best girl alive."

"I thought not," replied Doctor Brainard quietly. "But if you'll marry some good girl within a year, I'll put the ranch back, pay your debts, and start you fresh."

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"You're awfully kind," exclaimed Bennett heartily; "but if that's the alternative I guess I'll have to sink or swim alone, for I can't meet you."

The shadow on John's face deepened, for with the alternative, even Home Farm, where he had buried his soul these last days, became like a "bird's nest filled with snow;" he couldn't return to it as he had done any more.

He glanced up at the doctor, who appeared thoroughly to enjoy his pipe and had the air of a man fully satisfied with his own point of view, and, after a little, he said: "I know marriage doesn't need me to plead for it—an old bachelor's views on the subject aren't worth much. But there is such a thing, John, as filling your mouth with ashes and thinking it's honey. There is such a thing as planting your garden beds full of sterile weeds. . . . I see that James has begun to graft the bushes down there by the south fence, and I want to go over and look at the trees." He rose slowly.

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"I shall wire Bob Furniss to-night," Bennett said, "to sell out my share of the ranch."

"And with what's left," said Doctor Brainard, "after you've paid up your debts, I suppose you'll go round the world again."

And the young fellow half-heartedly returned his smile: "I guess that's about right, Doctor!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE SUSPICION

VIRGINIA BATHURST, in her riding-habit, coming from the stables, the dogs at her heels, felt herself not more than "sweet and twenty," and looked it too, for, touched by one of those rare auroras which now and then give to a woman the semblance of a false dawn—her step and her laugh, her gestures of happiness as she played with her dogs, the song she hummed as she went into the house, were all buoyant. She was expecting a visitor, and the room was lighted by the warmest of lamps.

Hesitating whether or not she would go up-stairs to dress or stop where she was, she finally decided on the latter course, and went into one of the smaller rooms, where a big fire lighted on the hearth was the only sound likely to disturb her.

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She was alone at Bathurst House for the time with Grace Cornwallis, now Mrs. Peter Bathurst, Junior, and Grace's baby. Peter, Senior, and his sons were in Saratoga for the races, and the lady of her house was left to her own devices, wanderings, and ridings; she had gone pretty well over the country. It had been with relief that she had seen them all leave Tallahoe, for she wanted to be alone and to pursue her thoughts from under her husband's eyes. Daily she had reviewed the lands of memory as she had gone daily over the Tallahoe country, where now and then she would bring her horse up short at a perilous jump—so she would bring her thoughts up short at the one perilous place. She knew how great the danger was there, though sometimes she would deny it and ride straight and free; then again she would confess that it was a fatal danger, and if she should go on would mean some kind of death.

She knew that she loved John Bennett, boy

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as he was, young as he was—and that her defrauded heart, which had experienced many disappointments, found in this man's love and being, solace and beauty, and that she could there find happiness.

She accepted the fact as it was, she acknowledged it frankly and she was great in the way she faced it; but until this afternoon here at Tallahoe, when he was coming back to her, she had not been quite able to decide what she was going to do with him.

His adoration and passion, the security in the fact that he had never and probably would never love again as he did now, gave her strength to be mistress of herself; she felt there wasn't any hurry about the climax, if there was to be one, and she knew that with her experience she held him, and that it was for her to do what she liked—she knew that he was hers. She understood in a measure the pilgrimage he made to her, how he had come to her shrine; she understood that for the time

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she was a sacred thing to him; he was young and clean-eyed, passionate and manly, and she knew that she was for the present all women to him and that she would remain throughout his life as the one woman; according to the way she should manage this situation, his ideals, his happiness or his miseries would take form and date from her.

Virginia understood that she need not fear a rival; for a long time she would be safe in the little kingdom he gave her; whether she should decide to become its queen—or to remain its goddess—it wouldn't for the present make any difference to this ardent lover; it was her own ground, her own realm.

It was difficult to feel that the very most common-sense course, the wisest course, was to wreck this kingdom in John's eyes, and it hadn't been possible yet for her to take decision, to think very clearly; she was far too conscious of herself, far too much a prey to her own self in it. She didn't know—she

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couldn't tell—what she would be “good enough”—she put it—“to do.”

She had forbidden him to speak to her of love—she had told him that the day he disobeyed her she would never see him again, laughing in her heart at his white face and his obedience, conscious how unable she would be to keep that threat! But poor John took her at her word and accepted the silence she forced, only because he believed her and wanted above all other things to be near to her.

In Newport he had attached himself to the worldly skirts of their set, and, as poor Doctor Brainard had known, followed like a pauper prince, and the pace was beyond his means.

He had seen, nevertheless, little of the woman for whom he was wasting his youth until he went away with them all on the yachting trip; it had been conceived to give Jack a chance to carry off the girl he was trying to win; he had chartered a yacht of his own for the party of butterflies who had flown off into

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something like a midsummer dream with Virginia for chaperone and Cynthia Forsythe as the goal.

The congressman, Peter Bathurst, Senior, *hors de combat* from the very first day, confined himself with his cocktails to his own quarters, and John Bennett had had the field for his own. During those summer days when the warm waters curled like azure under the keel—when sky and clouds seemed made of witchcraft and the boat in which they sailed to be a ship of dreams, the young man had sat by Virginia's side, read to her, watched the reflections in her eyes, basked under the tranquil beauty of her face, sunned himself in the sun of her, and longed to spend his whole existence in one kiss on her lips, which seemed to him to be the most perfect way in which he could offer her his soul.

He listened to her, existed for her, drank her, ate her, lived her until it was as though his very heart became the ship itself, and she

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rested on it and he seemed to carry the burden of her over every wave.

Because she had never flirted with him, as he knew the word to mean, because she had never once met the passion in his eyes by a passion in her own, he had never felt assuaged or much encouraged.

She never gave him permission to speak, and there was something about the way she treated him and her own attitude that kept him from a violent outburst. Even in the nights when they sat side by side on the deck, under the planets that swam above them in the heavens, she never so much as drew him to touch her, and John grew to worship her as well as to love her, and she became as sacred to him as she was desired. His case was hopeless and for his emotion and his ecstasy there was only one possible cure.

Virginia, as she waited for him, had chosen a big leather chair and seated herself in it, turning her back to the room and her face to

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the fire. She had been in riding dress when John found her on the porch at Newport, and she knew how much he liked to see her so. He would come in an hour, and she would remain as she was to receive him.

If she had chosen, she might have taken sincere satisfaction in contemplating the ways she had conducted herself with this young man in love. She had certainly been irreproachable; but she did not commend herself.

"As far as that goes," she thought, "I really ought never to have seen him again after the way he went on here. But as it now stands—as it now stands—Heaven knows—Heaven only knows."

Grace Bathurst came in with her child in her arms.

"Don't you," she asked, "want to look after the boy for a second, Virginia? I must answer a telephone call." And she put the blond child down in the lap of the woman in the big chair. The little thing leaned his curls against Mrs.

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Bathurst's breast and looked up at her with humid eyes. She bent over him, her slender hands with their sparkling rings caressed his baby head as she bent her head, and the fire-light played on the dark and on the golden hair. It delighted her that she could not, because of her age, have been the mother of Jack or Peter, nor even of Mrs. Peter, Junior, and that *this* was not her step-grandchild except by courtesy.

She thought these things as she bent over the child.

"To-day," she was saying to herself, "to-day he will be here—*soon*—and I'm almost sorry, for I never wanted so much to see him as to-day . . . it's not well for him to come while I'm so happy."

He had written her from Doctor Brainard's farm every day for a fortnight, and she had laughed over his letters and she had cried over them; hot, hasty, voluminous—a word misspelled here, here and there blotted with the

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lover's haste, and there was not one page which did not bear the fire and beauty of passion. These were the things that brought heaven down to earth, or rather, lifted the dreary earth to the skies.

Nicholas Pymne wrote to her, too.

She had not seen her old friend since the day he had left her, two years or more ago. He had told her then that when she wanted him she was to send for him. Poor, poor, dear man! But every week, faithfully, he wrote her—charming letters, full of the topics of the day: clever, witty, a little malicious, masculine, and discreet; but how dry and cold they read beside those other letters from Home Farm, in their big envelopes, many of them without beginning or end! John's letters had made her young again, made her press them to her lips as though they had been screens to shield her face from herself. In them the boy had told her everything she had forbidden him to say—he had told her without stint or fear: in them

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he had been a man at last, and she saw what a real man he was, what a dear, deep and tender man he was and what a heart he had and how he was hers. John wrote of himself till his ranch life lived for her, he made Home Farm a rural poem, until, reading, she had closed her eyes and wandered through the meadows with him as though they had been boy and girl.

Ah—that was it, boy and girl! Oh, why couldn't they be, why? For why must he bring all this richness to a woman bound and chained as she was bound and chained; bound fast as death, bound to a man who loved her although she hated him; and as for her girlhood, already it was too far behind.

"Come, baby," Grace put out her hands to her child; "come, darling."

She knelt on the floor before Virginia and the child. "Come, Jacky—he won't leave you, Virginia—aren't you proud? Who do you think just telephoned me, fancy, from the Washingtons', over on the hill? Cynthia, she's

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over there with them. Isn't it bully? It's just two years, you know, since we were all here together, Virginia. It's a reunion, isn't it? You remember how awfully in love Cynnie was with John, don't you? And now I've got a piece of news to tell you. She'll want to tell you herself, but I'm going to get ahead of her, for she didn't forbid me. It's all right between Jack and Cynthia, but I suppose you really know."

Virginia's face reddened, and she hid it by the head of the child. "I'm not surprised," she said; "I almost knew it. It will be a piece of news to tell John." And then for the first time she gave her stepdaughter the information that John Bennett was coming that very night.

"I had a telephone from him some time ago," she said with what ease she could. She was embarrassed under the younger woman's frank gaze. "He's going to make a visit or two in the Valley and will begin here with us."

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"Oh!" Mrs. Peter answered rather vaguely, "here, in his old hunting-ground, isn't it?"

And the hostess repeated: "Yes, his old hunting-ground."

Mrs. Peter took her child and went over to the window and stood there patting the pane with the baby's little hand.

She knew—they all knew—everybody knew but Virginia's husband. What did she know? Why, she knew that John Bennett was in love with Virginia, desperately in love with her. But then, that wasn't anything; loads of men had been in love with Virginia.

Their names had been coupled already, over and over again in Syracuse and Newport; but Virginia's name stood much, and no one ever really supposed that Peter Bathurst, Senior, was the kind of man to endure the slightest pang of jealousy.

To Grace, with her heart at peace, with her child in her arms, and her husband not far away, the idea of Virginia's romance was not

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sympathetic; she didn't think for a moment that Virginia cared a bit, but she thought that she was ruining the life of a young man.

"Poor fellow," she said to herself, "poor John!"

"I wonder," she reflected as the baby's hand beat against the glass, "I wonder that she lets him come here like this, with all the men away. She knows that people talk and what they say. I don't know what the Valley will say now; I really don't know."

She wondered so long, and so profoundly that her thoughts began to grow complicated, and her cheeks grew red and her face troubled.

"Oh, no," she said aloud, "it isn't possible, it couldn't be possible!"

CHAPTER XX

WITHOUT MERCY

JOHN, coming in in the evening, found the house deserted. There was no one in the library before the fire where Virginia had been waiting for him; she had left before his trap drove up to the door. There was no one to make him welcome, and from the servants who took his luggage and showed him to his room—his own old room—he learned that the family were away for the most part and no one but Mrs. Peter, Junior, and Mrs. Bathurst, at home.

As far as John was concerned this news in itself did very well for a greeting, and he needed all the time there was before dinner in which to accustom himself to the knowledge that he was to be practically alone with his hostess here. His fortnight in the country had

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made him restless instead of quieting him, and his heart was all in a tumult—his whole nature like the summer land around him, ripe, mature, ready for the harvest.

There was a sweetness and a charm, something more, almost a delight in the very odor of the house as he came in at the front door. He ran up-stairs before the man-servant to his room and saw the curtains falling white before his windows, and the aspect of the place had the familiarity of something which he had known and loved, and where, if he had been unhappy, he had as well experienced his greatest bliss.

How had he ever lived through two years without seeing her again? Why, he had once held her in his arms in this very room, and after such a madness she let him now come back again—she let him now come back and find her here with no one else to claim her. She had never blamed him, never referred to that past; and as he thought this he rejoiced

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in it—and also thought in wonder and amazement and with a great tide of excitement that almost terrified him that after all he had said in his daily letters, she still had let him come to her.

He dressed leisurely for dinner, and he was too young yet, too simple, too sincere not to take a great pride in his looks, not to be glad that he was tall and strong and young. He tied his cravat, put his hair in order, and stood for a moment before he went down with his hand on the door that two years before he had opened for her with such mingled emotions when she came in to him the night before he left Tallahoe. But as he went down-stairs something of his spirits left him, for he realized that now when he looked at her it would be with the knowledge back of them both of everything he had written and said. He wondered how she would welcome him, what she would say? And if he should, by any chance, find her alone—although there would

WITHOUT MERCY

be nothing easier than to take her in his arms, would he dare do it?

John found three women before the fire in the big hall, and there were several men there; too, whom he remembered for old cronies. His first thought was something of relief, and it helped him to gain his self-possession. Mrs. Bathurst gave the guest her hand limply—she scarcely touched his—she scarcely spoke to him, she didn't look at him, and his life went out of him at her soulless welcome. She sent him in to dinner with some one whom in his excitement he could not see—he went in with a girl who had to speak to him twice before John, lifting up his blue eyes, slowly recognized her to be an old friend.

He had been sent in to dinner with a marvelously good-looking young creature, all fire and sparkle, tall and bright-lipped. She turned, laughing to him.

“How perfectly killing of you not to know me!”

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"But you didn't know me, did you?" he asked.

"Naturally not," she said; "Bennett isn't an uncommon name; Mrs. Bathurst said a Mr. Bennett was here, but I didn't think of you, and when you came in I almost roared, do you know."

John's hard white face relaxed a little, his brow cleared just a trifle. "I don't really know you now," he confessed, "but I used to know you very well; indeed, I called you by your first name."

"Yes, Johnny," she nodded, "perhaps you did, but you needn't call me by my first name now. I am prouder and haughtier than I used to be. Shall I tell you something?"

"Yes, do," he urged.

She slightly leaned toward him, smiling with amusement, her eyes blue as Irish lakes, and she whispered with a pretty combination of grace and coquetry: "Well, your hair isn't really red, you know!"

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Bennett smiled, then began to laugh. "Why, that's what we quarreled over! You called me red-head and I was perfectly furious with you."

Gazing at the hair in question, his companion said: "I should say it was more *pink* than red; but it's a lovely color, and you have grown crosser-looking and more bad-humored than ever."

John talked to her through dinner and he overdid it. She acted to him as a stimulant would have done after a hard race; he made himself charming, devoted; there was a piquancy in the situation; he liked to have her call him down and tease him. His vivid recollections of her had an agreeable little sting in every one of them, for he had loved her madly in his boyhood and she had turned out to be a ripping girl.

John looked during dinner not once toward his hostess, and Mrs. Peter watched his politeness to Milly Haven with relief and content.

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Virginia Bathurst watched him too. As they came out together she said:

"So you and Mr. Bennett are old friends, Miss Haven?"

"*Heavens*, yes," explained the girl. "Why, he was in love with me when I was in short frocks, and we've been talking about it. He was awfully amusing, you couldn't think, and he ran up all sorts of ridiculous debts buying me flowers and getting himself a dress-suit."

She linked her arm in Mrs. Bathurst's and looked back over her lovely young shoulder, white as a snow bank, toward the room where the men lingered with their cigars.

"Hasn't he turned out well," she said warmly; "isn't he nice to look at?"

And after her hostess' murmured response she defended herself, laughing: "Oh, I don't doubt he's a heart-breaker, and I'm not smitten with him. I used to think it the greatest fun in the world to tease him to death, and I expect I should think so now."

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Milly Haven spoke nonchalantly with the assurance that beauty and youth give. She turned away and settled her mass of dark hair before an old mirror, flanked by candle lights. She moved well, with dignity and much grace; her hair had no lights in it, nothing but the shades of night.

"Grace," she said, "listen, isn't that your baby?"

"Yes," said the mother, "he's a naughty thing to-night, he absolutely refuses to go to sleep."

"Oh, let me run up to him!" Milly exclaimed. "You know I adore him."

As she went up-stairs without waiting for permission, Grace said to her mother-in-law: "Isn't she stunning, Virginia; did you notice her at dinner with John?"

"Charming, charming!"

"Oh, they're too beautiful together," said the young married woman rapturously, "made for each other. I knew they'd hit it off, it's

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been a pet dream of mine. Oh, dear, I hope it won't fall through."

Mrs. Bathurst went to the fire and put her foot on the edge of the fire-dog, lifting her dress a little above her satin shoe. She leaned on the mantelpiece and stared down at the flames. She had chosen, after careful thought, a frock brown as an autumn leaf and around her waist fell a long scarf, its ends hung with little gleaming crystals. They dropped into the monotone folds of the chiffon in her dress like bits of ice on a brown forest stream. She had dressed with care; she was very pale, and her pearls added to her pallor.

Grace, as she stood by her side, thought she had never seen Virginia so lovely or so sad.

"You've no bad news, have you?"

"Why do you ask it? No."

"You seem a bit tired."

"I rode twenty miles and the horse has a hard mouth."

The two women turned at a sound on the

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stairway; Milly Haven had come down again with Grace's child in her arms. He was in his night-dress and he nestled against her.

"Don't bring him any farther, Milly," called his mother, "he'll catch cold. What a perfect goose you are! Take him back."

As the men came out of the dining-room Milly Haven remained where she was, laughing and holding the child under the light of the first turn on the stairs.

John Bennett looked up and saw her and the sudden maturity in her beauty, a pretty maternity in the picture. Reluctantly, as though it were against his will, he walked slowly over to where she stood. He put his hand out to the little boy.

"Hello, Jackit," he said, "what's the row with you? He's a jolly little kid, isn't he?"

"He's a darling little dear," said the girl warmly, kissing him.

"Milly," cried the mother, "please, please take him back to the nurse."

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And the girl obeyed, making the baby wave an affable good night to the company; then she went laughing up-stairs with her pretty burden.

John Bennett watched her, waiting until she had turned out of sight; then he slowly traversed the room to the fireplace.

Sitting there with all of them, with Mrs. Peter and his hostess, and Donald Dashwood and the others—not with Milly Haven, for she didn't come back and he didn't miss her or know of her absence—he passed the most wretched evening of his life. Although he sat where he could see his hostess and addressed some confused words to her that were briefly answered, it was their only communion. He watched her pale, pure cheek, and he felt that she was cold and dead to him—voiceless, soundless as a bell which has been broken in the mold. The poor fellow tried vainly to think what it might mean, and finally made up his mind that she was angry at his

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letters and that she had let him come to tell him so, to put him definitely in his place, and for just this reason she had let him come here when she would be alone and could tell him his fate. His misery was so keen, his sense of desolation so complete, that his face aged in that half hour as he sat there and let his heart cry out to the woman in her saffron dress with the crystal beads that hung like trickling silver down the brown folds of her gown. His whole state of mind had altered; try as he would he couldn't bring up one sweet, consoling memory. His companion of the summer evenings on the yacht, the love of his dreams, seemed defaced from the universe and this *belle dame sans merci* to have taken her place.

"Gosh," he breathed to himself, "I wonder if she thinks it's fair to make a chap go through such hell?"

But she never stirred from her quiet indolent indifference throughout the evening, and

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even the others found her unresponsive and left early. Grace lingered as though she did not want to leave them alone together, but finally she, too, went up-stairs; and then John drew his breath in so that it came cold around his heart and seemed to hold it like a vise. Like a man thrown into a whirlpool and bidden to swim for his life, he heard the rushing waters thunder in his ears and his very lips tasted of salt, as if the spray had touched them.

Mrs. Bathurst was immovable before him; the firelight around her, the crystals gleaming on her dress—she swung one small foot in its satin shoe to and fro; it marked his hour for him like a living pendulum. John waited until every sound had died away, then he came over and sat down by her in the chair close at her side. No fewer than a hundred first words had been forming in his mind, but he threw them all away—he simply sat and looked at her so long and without one word that

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she finally turned her head and the great pallor of her face was swept to scarlet.

"Well," she said evenly, "does it seem like old times here?" She tried to smile at him, bit her lip, and stopped.

"I meant," said Bennett, striving with his thick voice to articulate clearly, "I meant every word that I wrote you in those letters, every single word."

And Mrs. Bathurst said: "I've kept those letters, every one."

"Oh—"

"I'll give them back to you; you may use them all again; they're far too good to waste, John."

She struggled again with herself and, winning again, said, with his hardening face to help:

"I mean to say, when you make love to her—a nice girl, some girl whom you can marry, you can copy those out to her—you might even send them as they are, some of

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them have no beginning or end." She laughed gently and put out one of her lovely hands. "My dear boy, don't look so savage, please."

The waters that had surged around him began to die down; the spray on his lips was turning to a burning fire.

"Is this the way women do," he said, "is this the way? Is it the way you do to Pynne and others? No, no," he interrupted himself, "no, you don't mean it, you're only angry at me for something I can't guess. I know I was mad to go on as I did, but I couldn't help it; you forbade me to speak and I had to write. I was afraid that you'd send them all back to me, but you didn't." And here, with the tension snapped for a moment, he broke forth: "It's no crime to love you, is it?"

And those words freed him, as though the four letters that made the word love were the wand to knock off his chains. He had both her hands; struggle as she would, she couldn't get away. But she kept up, she kept up.

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He repeated: "It's no crime just to love you, is it? Oh, do you hear me?" And he said it, not knowing any words more eloquent, twenty times.

If he only might have possessed then the penetration to see behind that quiet face, to have known for one second of a lifetime what a perfect mate she was for him, then—

"Will you let my hands go, John, will you let them go? There. Will you get up, John?"

They both rose.

"Good night, good night; you promised not to do this, you know—you've gone back on your word, you are very, very foolish and very young. You will never listen to me."

Bennett said something under his breath and came close to her, fixing his darkened eyes on her face.

"I will listen," he murmured; "I want to listen, and I want to hear you say just one thing."

"I will never say it," she said, "never."

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She had once before used the words she now employed: "Foolish boy, foolish boy. My poor John!"

"For God's sake," he cried, "don't use those words; it isn't possible that you don't care for me, it isn't possible!"

Then, as he saw she was going to make him an answer, he put out his hand: "Don't tell me, don't." He turned his young face away, and if he had not done so then he would have seen her as she was, for her mask fell at the sight of his emotion.

"You'll get over this," she said gently; "you will forget it all."

"Hush," he said fiercely, "I want to die with it."

And she laughed softly, but not without tenderness.

"Nonsense," she answered him, "don't think of death—your life is all before you. Remember that picture that we've both just seen on the stairs."

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But before she could finish he had caught her hand again brutally.

"I don't know why you treat me so," he said; "why you make fun of me and laugh at me. I'm a man and my life is all yours, all yours. Oh," he breathed, drinking in her face with his ardent eyes, "how I love you! Don't you want it, don't you want me?"

She said to herself under her breath: "I can't last for ever; just a minute more, just a little more—" And at bay before him she made one final try. "What are you asking me for?" She put it to him, controlling her voice and her eyes.

And he stammered, made a desperate gesture and whispered close to her: "I love you, you know that, I love you. When I was a boy you came then—you were kind—and ever since then I've looked to you, to you—for all."

Trying again, trying again and winning, smiling on him defiantly with the old dear smile, having herself well in hand and daring

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to do so, she put her hands against his broad chest, both her hands, and met his eyes with her own.

"John," she said, "John, I remember that time, too. Trust me, go on trusting me; it's all right, go on looking to me."

And he stammered: "You mean—you mean—"

"I mean," she said, "that you must go upstairs to your room, please. I ask you to go."

But brought out of the dazzling passion, in which he had nearly lost his reason, by her serenity and her quiet, he said more calmly:

"Not until you promise me, not until you promise me."

Seeing that he was not to be withstood, knowing that her own powers of resistance were at their end, she said desperately: "Promise you what—what do you want?"

And once again he whispered, "All."

And it was perfectly useless for her to hold out her hand to keep him back, quite useless;

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he had taken her again in his arms, and he never forgot throughout his life the wonder of it, the marvel of it. For this time was unlike the other time; this time she knew, and she was looking at him with a light in her eyes, even as he kissed her lids down.

"I want you," he stammered, "I want you, Virginia." He dared to call her name, to breathe it, as he had called it in his dreams. "You must marry me, you must divorce that drunken beast."

From his broad shoulders, all the length of his splendid body, she felt him as he held her, and she knew that he would never be any other woman's as he was hers, and that no other woman would ever touch the clear marvel of the first wine of John's first love.

When she found her breath, she said: "There's some one on the stairs, I hear them; will you set me free?"

And once again, without any fear of detection, he said: "Not until you promise me."

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"You mean," she whispered, "that you look to me—"

And he cried: "Yes, for all."

And she assented: "I promise you. I promise you—let me go."

And John, still holding her, demanded again: "All?"

She repeated the word to him: "All."

"Mrs. Bathurst, Mrs. Bathurst—" Milly Haven's voice, cautious, cleverly distanced, as though she were too wise a woman to come suddenly on a tête-à-tête—and Milly appeared on the landing, slowly coming down the broad stairs.

"Mrs. Bathurst, are you there? Won't you come up? Grace's little boy isn't well."

Pausing on the last step, Milly looked into the shadow of the room, where the lamplight and the firelight were insufficient illumination. Virginia went quickly over to her.

"Come up, will you? Jackit's very feverish. And, Johnny," she called easily and a little

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imperiously over to the young man who had not moved from his place before the fire, "Johnny Bennett, won't you telephone to the doctor? Doctor Shepherd, at the Big Tree Inn. That's right, isn't it, Mrs. Bathurst?"

Later, much later, well on toward four o'clock, Milly Haven was awakened out of a doze by her beautiful hostess coming into the room.

"Oh, is the baby worse?" cried Milly, starting up in bed.

Virginia held her dressing-gown close around her and sat down on the side of Milly's bed.

Miss Haven had never seen Mrs. Bathurst before that afternoon, and she never forgot how that lady impressed her on this sudden and unexpected visit toward the dawn. Flushed by her anxiety for Grace's baby, no doubt, tired from her long watching, her slender beautiful hands holding her gown across her

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breast, the lovely disorder of her dark hair, she was an unusual picture.

"No, no, the baby's all right. He's asleep; it was nothing but a little indigestion. Grace is asleep, too."

As it appeared then, Mrs. Bathurst was the only one in the house who was not asleep.

"But I've been horribly restless, and as I looked out of my window I thought I saw a man moving across the lawn. Of course, it was ridiculous; there's no one in the house, but my room was intolerable to me."

Milly afterward thought that she had not once considered her as a person, though she bent and lightly touched the young girl's head.

"I think I'm rather nervous to-night," she said. "I know I've disturbed you very much, I hope you will forgive me."

"Oh," Milly exclaimed warmly, "I'm awfully glad that you felt that you could come or that I could be of any use."

She tried to lift her heavy eyelids and to

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seem intelligent; she had been profoundly asleep when Virginia awakened her.

Mrs. Bathurst said more naturally, with her lovely smile: "Don't try to stay awake, go to sleep again. If you'll let me, I'll throw myself down on your lounge and rest there."

"Oh, no," said the girl, "you'll be cold." She made a place by her side. "Lie here." She drew the coverlid over the beautiful figure of her hostess, and by Milly Haven's side the lady lay so quietly that she seemed to rest.

Milly Haven, on the contrary, remained for some time awake, wondering many things in her clever mind, thinking out in a direct fashion a point of view, and her young cheeks grew warm and her eyes kindled in the dark, and some of her meditations were as profound as her neighbor's.

The blue eyes, whose dark color had inspired little John Bennett to send gentians at Easter, grew soft, and their sparkle, too keen and bright for tenderness, as a rule, dimmed,

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and Milly Haven's Irish eyes were soft under her long lashes.

Mrs. Bathurst's breath came evenly at last, and Milly had the satisfaction of knowing that her human propinquity had proved a reposing element for the lady in some trouble or other; and then Milly herself fell asleep, and when she finally awakened from a dream in which she was trying to pull John Bennett out of a fish-pond where he was gathering water-lilies, Milly found that her companion was gone, and nothing but a long imprint on the bed and a crushed pillow told her that Mrs. Bathurst's visit had been a reality.

CHAPTER XXI

A NURSERY RHYME

JOHN BENNETT, at noon the next day, was aware of an infernal pounding on his door. He had been dreaming as well as Milly Haven, but his dreams were not about fishponds or lilies, and there wasn't any Irish-eyed girl in them. And when the knock came and the voice there was something in it that recalled pleasure, and for this reason he opened his eyes, heavy with the late sleep of the morning.

"John, John," he recognized the voice as Grace's, "do get up, it's nearly noon and we want to know when to order the horses."

Bennett jumped out of bed and cautiously opened his door a bit. "Hello, what's the row, what does anybody want to do?"

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"Why, don't you want to ride before luncheon?"

"Love it. What are the rest going to do?"

"I'll telephone the stables; and hurry, John."

In an hour John came down into the glorious morning with, as he supposed, a new world for his own, inhabited by one woman and himself, and that woman was to be his. He loved her: every other consideration was a phantom.

The horses were waiting at the steps, the bay mare which he liked to ride and the new Ladybird, with a side-saddle for—as John thought with a bounding heart—for his mistress. His mistress—his hot blood showed how his shame, young as he was, glowed at the word; this was what she would be, if she couldn't get a divorce from her husband. But of course she could, and she would; that wasn't in the question. Even this hour would not go by before he would see her again, and he looked toward the staircase for her to come down.

A NURSERY RHYME

Up-stairs in the hall, little Jack's nurse was standing—little Jack was well, then, this morning—and he was being bidden to

“Ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross,”

and the quaint words caught John's ear in the silence of the house.

John the night before had been completely mad. He had gone to Mrs. Bathurst's boudoir and waited for her there until she should come out of Grace's room later. But she had not come, and when at length he had stolen to his own apartment, the dawn had risen in the east.

“To see a fine lady get on a white horse.”

He heard a step in the corridor and his heart stopped its beat; he would help her on to her horse and they would ride away together, and would there be any place far enough away, any wood deep enough, any wonderful, golden yel-

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low, mellow autumn wood sweet enough for him to ride into with her?

The lady in her riding-habit had fairly come up to his side before he saw that it was not Mrs. Bathurst.

"Are you ready?" Milly Haven asked. "Come, then—it's nearly one o'clock, and we can ride only an hour. Isn't it a glorious day?"

Milly wasn't a giggling girl, she didn't even smile very much; she was mature for her years. She had a fine, well-moulded figure; she rode straight, her brown habit suited her tint and her color perfectly. She tranquilly drew on her gloves.

"Grace says I may ride the horse you sent on from the West for Mr. Bathurst. Isn't she a pretty creature? Are you ready?"

John Bennett followed her in silence, he had not even bidden her good morning; as she passed out he gave a despairing glance up the stairway, where, his blond head shining in the sun, little Johnny was in his nurse's arms.

A NURSERY RHYME

The nurse sang her chant :

“Humpty-Dumpty had a great fall, had a great fall.”

John lagged behind his companion, and the groom helped Miss Haven to mount Ladybird.

Miss Haven took her time, settled herself comfortably in the saddle, gay, debonair and happy.

As Bennett flung his leg over his horse he said : “Anybody else riding?”

“No one else,” responded his companion ; “poor Grace is done up after last night, and I guess Mrs. Bathurst must be at Albany by this.”

“Albany?” he repeated.

“Why, yes, that’s the route for Saratoga, isn’t it?”

And at his blank staring she exclaimed :

“Why evidently you don’t know ; didn’t anybody tell you? Mrs. Bathurst left at eight this

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morning for Saratoga. Mr. Bathurst telephoned her to go on for the steeplechase, and of course when a woman's married—I suppose she has to obey.”

CHAPTER XXII

A SCENE

AS soon as Bennett could make a decent excuse and get away, he went to Saratoga, and the first person he saw after leaving his train was Peter Bathurst, Senior, in the bar of the United States Hotel. The gentleman was being piloted away by a book-maker evading the new law by the help of his worthy friends. Bathurst was not so intoxicated as not to recognize his sons' college friend, and held out his hand affably.

"Benny, Benny," gasped the congressman, "my dear old frien', John Benny. Got any money? Here's Van Cortlandt, he'll take care of it for you, old fell. Come in see us, come see m' wife."

Bennett got away from him not without

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cursing his existence. "Bound to this beast," he thought, "tied to this sot!" He couldn't bear the sight of Bathurst.

The next person to cross his path was Nicholas Pynne. The honorable gentleman wore a smart costume in the height of summer fashion, and sported a flower in his buttonhole; he looked extremely fit and debonair, and came brightly along the piazza of the United States Hotel, the very picture of good spirits and good cheer.

"Hello, Bennett!" he exclaimed heartily. "Where did *you* drop from? I haven't seen you for an age. You've left the West, then? The Bathursts are all here, do you know?"

"Yes," returned the other, "I've just seen the governor now. I'm looking for Jack and Peter."

"Why, the whole lot of them are out at the De Puysters' for lunch. You'll come along, too, won't you? I'll be responsible for your welcome. The De Puysters keep open house."

A SCENE

"No, no," Bennett refused; "I'll run in to see them when they come back later."

"Married yet?" Nicholas asked as they walked along together. "That pretty little Miss Forsythe. . . . You know, of course, and Jack—"

"Yes," Bennett nodded.

When Prynne finally left him at the motor-car into which he got to drive out to the De Puysters' place, John felt completely left out and put aside. A terrible misgiving suddenly came over him at the sight of Prynne, at the sight of Mr. Bathurst, and the atmosphere of Saratoga, its garish, blatant ugliness, the smell, the temper of the place, all assumed a sudden gross reality to him, and he felt at last as though he were beginning to waken out of a long, long dream.

He wrote to Mrs. Bathurst a passionate appeal, and, with quantities of flowers, he sent the letter to the hotel where the Bathursts were stopping.

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When she received the sudden gift, Virginia held the letter to her lips—she wore it for days in her bosom—she didn't read one line of it then, but John couldn't know that . . . she put his flowers away and kept them until they were ghosts and dried, until they fell apart like dust, but he never knew these things.

At tea-time, having received no answer to his letter, John went in to see her sitting with visitors. His first glance showed him that she had changed wonderfully and her face was altered so that it made him sick to see the transformation. Virginia Bathurst's youth was gone, her contours had sharpened, and to any one but a man mad in idolatrous love, she would have seemed less beautiful and much aged.

Nicholas Pynne, as well as several other men, were there with her, and John discovered that Peter, Junior, had gone back to Tallahoe to his wife and child, and that Jack had gone back to Tallahoe to his fiancée, and no

A SCENE

one vouchsafed any information about Mr. Bathurst, Senior.

The lady welcomed him as though he were her boys' friend; she said how sorry she was that they had both gone, and what a pity it was that John hadn't known it. She talked to Pynne as she used to do in the Valley, before John Bennett had told her how he loved her—before he held her in his arms and kissed her . . . kissed her. He said these things over to himself defiantly as he sat there staring at her, and he bore her cruelty with bitter indignation. "She's a cruel, cruel coquette," he raged within himself; "she's a wicked, wicked woman." And then he contradicted and affirmed that she was broken-hearted and suffering, that she was so good, so heavenly good that she was reproaching herself, and his wild chivalry provided him with the needed courage to speak to her. . . . She hardly answered him.

Then he thought miserably: "She's angry

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with me, I've offended her." And on this he built his hopes, settling back in his chair and doggedly determining to outstay every man of them.

She tolerated his presence, scarcely speaking to him, ignoring him as though he had been a mere boy, awkwardly lingering on, unbidden, endured.

At length, the others took leave, but John didn't budge—Pyrnne rose the last and looked over at him.

"Which way are *you* going, Bennett?"

The young man's voice was hoarse as he answered:

"Why, I'm not going anywhere right now, Pyrnne; I'm going to stop here another few moments."

But Mrs. Bathurst interrupted him: "I'm going out to dine with Mr. Pyrnne myself; we might all go down together. Won't you wait, Nicholas, until I fetch my hat and gloves, and we'll run along?" And when she returned

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to the drawing-room after quite a long time, Pynne had mercifully left the room and the lover was in it alone. . . . He stood there white as death; his patent misery and his despair and anger challenged her.

"What have I done, what have I done, that you should treat me so?" he broke forth. "Do you want me to kill myself!"

At these words she seemed startled at first, but said quite calmly and with much sternness: "It's impossible even to see you, you make it impossible. I want you to go to-night from Saratoga, not to try to see me any more. You don't want to force me to—" and she stopped here, although her voice was perfectly in control.

"Why, you forget," he cried wildly, "you forget!" His cheeks crimsoned, the tears sprang to his eyes.

"I shall never forget that I have liked you very much, and I hope you won't make me do so. Please, please—"

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She drew her hands away from him and he stammered: "You promised, you promised," and caught her hands again in spite of her defense and crushed them.

"You don't love me, then?" he asked desperately. "You don't love me?"

His passion, his youth, his pleading blinded him—he saw neither pity nor kindness in her face.

"Tell me, answer me, don't you—*don't* you *care?*"

"Why, of course not," she said with effort, "how absurd! Come, John, *do* have common sense."

Cruelty was the best remedy she knew. She stood like a surgeon with the knife.

Then Bennett gave a wild cry, and flung her hands away as though they had been objects of a despised spoil and he didn't want them any more. Then he laughed like a crazy man and caught her to him violently, pressed her to him until she felt the very iron of his bones

A SCENE

and muscles against her and felt knit to him, and he kissed her until she cried out for mercy against his burning lips.

"There," he panted, "there. No matter what you say, you are mine. No man has ever kissed you more!"

He flung her violently from him, and before she could speak to him, had she possessed the power to speak, Bennett rushed from the room, and in the hall collided with Nicholas Pynne, who was on his happy way to his appointment with Mrs. Bathurst. Bennett dashed past the Albanian without a greeting, and Pynne, as he came into the sitting-room, said:

"Why, Virginia, what have you done to poor young Bennett! He nearly toppled me over as I passed him just now in the corridor."

The woman he came to see was standing by the center-table in the room, leaning on it, some agitation visible on her beautiful face; but she had heard Pynne's step—she had pulled herself together, after the manner of

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women of the world. Nicholas was himself too happy to be suspicious. He felt himself nearer to Virginia Bathurst than he had ever been in his life, for not three days before she had telegraphed him to meet her at Albany, and they had come up here on the train together to join Peter Bathurst, Senior. After two years she had sent for Nicholas to come to her, and he had quietly obeyed without one word or remark or reminder, without one demand. He was profoundly happy.

After a few words of greeting, she said: "I can't go out to dinner to-night, Nicholas."

"Really! Are you ill?"

"I'm *enervée*. I've just had a terrible scene with John Bennett. He's in trouble and he came to confide in me."

"Oh," accepted her companion, his nice eyes not changing their expression, "poor chap, I'm awfully sorry, but don't let it knock you all out like this."

"But it has," said the woman with an effort,

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"and I shan't go out. It's given me a nasty headache."

And Pynne expostulated: "Don't spoil our fun because the third person is out of sorts, Virginia. It shall be, however, just as you say, my dear; but I think a little air and music and a cocktail will set you up. I don't want you to stop here and brood about this boy. It's far better to come with me as we planned."

"Do you think so?"

"Of course I do," he answered decidedly. She hesitated; she didn't want to spoil his pleasure, she didn't want to make another inch of misery or even cast another cloud. She again took up her gloves, which she had drawn off.

"Very well then—come—let us go. . . ."

"Splendid!" he cried, beaming with the pleasure her concession gave him. "You're the right sort." He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. He didn't ask her anything about Bennett's trouble, he didn't think he needed to ask. He had no jealousy as he thought of him,

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only a kindly comprehensive pity for any man who loved this dear woman in vain. . . . He never even dreamed that she cared for "the Bennett boy."

A little later, leaning across the table to her, a vision of the young chap's face as he had seen it on the stairs recurring to him, he said :

"I wish I could be of some service to Bennett, Virginia."

And with a singular smile, Mrs. Bathurst said : "Perhaps some day—you may be."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DOCTOR AND HIS BOY

WHEN the first cold of November had stung and passed, when the middle of the month had bitten through the country and found the heart of the earth, when throughout the land fragrant torches had been lit and the air smelt of fire and pine, the deceptive haze of an unexpected midsummer day fell over the country like a veil and there came a softness on the wintry air as delusive as a woman's promises which she never means to keep. Doctor Brainard sat in his office expediting his last patient; eager to get out for a certain drive.

The last patient had scarcely closed the front door behind him, carrying away with him his complaints and his groans and his prescriptions, when the door from the hallway opened

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into Doctor Brainard's office and another visitor came in.

"My word, John," said the doctor, with his hands outstretched, "I can't believe my eyes!"

He had not seen his boy nor heard one line from him since the young man left him in the summer.

"You're an ungrateful chap," but the doctor paused and followed up, "In Heaven's name, John, I believe you've come to see me professionally. Haven't you, my son?"

He called him that name and looked at him over his glasses. Many years before the Bennett boy had stood where he was standing now, twisting between his hands his school cap, and nervous, awkward, and proud, he had said that rather than be sent to school by a woman he would work in a store.

Doctor Brainard at that time hadn't thought twice about the Bennett boy; but he had learned to love him dearly in the intervening years, and he had grown even dearer during

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these months when John had left him in utter ignorance of his whereabouts, and while the doctor from a distance watched him and followed him as well as he could, yearning, but not daring to make a sign.

Bennett flung his overcoat and hat on a chair; he looked thirty years old—his first youth was for ever gone, his face bore the marks of things which it cut the doctor to the heart to see and recognize.

"If I were his own father now," he thought. "Thank God, his mother has been spared this!" "Sit down, my boy," he said.

John didn't do so; instead he thrust his hands in his pockets and walked over to the front windows and looked out into the bright street. A trolley-car ran between the asphalt where the horse-car used to swing lazily along. Down the wide street, in the sunlight, a long line of golden leaves blew in a whirling dance.

"Don't let me keep you from your visits,"

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Bennett quietly remarked, without so much as turning around. "I see the buggy's waiting, isn't it?"

Doctor Brainard, who had come up behind him, put his hands on his shoulders.

"You come along and drive with me; I've only got a couple of people to see, and you can wait outside. I shan't be long anywhere. After that we'll drive out in the country."

Aside from a word or two about a direction which they would take, Doctor Brainard did not talk to his prodigal until the last call had been made; then the young man drove him out of the town into the country.

"This isn't the first time you've been away from Syracuse, but it's the first time you've come back like this," the doctor said. "But you've come back, and as far as that goes, I take it as a good sign."

Between his teeth the young man said rather brutally: "Don't preach to me," and with undisturbed good-humor his friend answered:

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"Why, I haven't even the right to your confidences."

And the other exclaimed: "Lord, my confidences! I guess nobody would care to hear them; and as far as that goes, you're the only person in the world that cares a hang whether I live or die or go to hell! I've been a cur to bother you, and you've always been a brick, Doctor Brainard. I haven't any confidences or any excuses," and his pale face with its scars spoke more eloquently than his words to the older man. "But I've been through hell, all right," John said, and added more naturally: "It doesn't seem to have burned me up quite, though I wish it had!"

For a long time he drove without any further remark; finally the doctor asked him to hold up while he lighted a cigar.

John did so and lighted one as well, smoking it as he drove slowly between the bare yellow fields.

The golden light of the afternoon swept

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from horizon to horizon; the clustering trees were still leafy, for the winds this year had been few, and hillocks and furrows, gray fence rails and sandy roads were all painted and bathed in the warm deceptive glory. The sky, pale and cloudless, appeared to have lent all its light to the earth, and spread ethereal and cold over the warmer land.

“When you were up at the farm,” Doctor Brainard said, “I knew then just where you were and what you were going through—but a man can’t force a friend’s confidence.” He very delicately put himself on a plane with the younger man, as though they had been of an age. “I would have gladly helped you, but I don’t think any one ever helps another much—in such things, at any rate. Certain states only wear themselves out.” And after a few moments, he added, “When they take hold of a big, fine fellow such as you are, and drag him down, then they’re cursed—otherwise—”

The young fellow driving began to frown,

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but the doctor had been clever enough to stop at a word which John would like to follow up, and John repeated it and asked:

“Otherwise?”

“Why, they’re capable—” the doctor cast his eye over the mellow country—“they’re capable of going along with him into every season, of filling his barns and his storehouses until the grain’s all in.”

Bennett had never thought of Doctor Brainard as being young, as being anything but a frumpy old country doctor, and an old trump, a brick; as a man of sentiment, why, the very odors of anodynes and medicines in the gloomy old James Street house put romance away.

They passed a big red farm-house where the barn door stood open and the loft doors were wide. Bags of grain were being thrown up from a heaped wagon, and the doctor’s simile, taken from wayside things, appealed to his companion. Then he forgot everything but his own absorbing contemplations.

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"You've been in New York," said the doctor. "I suppose you've been more or less keeping yourself there. I've been sending your letters to the Club, and that's where I sent the last check."

John said cruelly: "I've been down there all this time, you're right. I didn't write because I didn't want to—I bit at everything I could find," he said sharply, "and I couldn't find anything to take the taste away—" He now turned his face to his friend, and the doctor looked at him with a quick alarm.

Doctor Brainard put his hand on his ward's knee. "I don't ask you any impertinent questions; it's your own life. I guess the stuff in you is good enough to pull you out. I know just about how damn fool you've been, John, but you haven't been taking drugs, have you?"

And the boy threw his bright head back and laughed. There was a bitterness and a touching sadness in his laugh. "Search me," he said. "By Jove; I wish I'd thought of them!"

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In spite of what his expression implied, the older man exclaimed with gratitude: "Good, good! You can cure any healthy animal of a sting, all right."

And John followed up: "Well, you know, they take it in their own way and roll in the mud."

And after quite an interval, John spoke again and said: "Doctor, you seem to think you know a lot about me."

"I know all the Valley knows," said his friend. "I know the common talk."

The young man frowned desperately; anger and rebellion, shame and humiliation had struggled with him for a long time, and he had given his confidences to no one.

"She's ruined my life at the start," he said passionately, "and I don't want to pull it together; I don't care a damn what becomes of me now. I haven't got a cent in the world; I've tasted the lowest things of life to forget her, and don't you talk about the gathering in of

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the grain to me, or of anything but a woman's cursed influence on a man. There's never going to be any decent harvest for me, Doctor Brainard; I've died young."

The doctor found there was no place for humor or even for philosophy. Though the man was young, what difference did that make? There was great affection in his voice as he asked:

"Why did you come back here, John?"

The other threw his cigar out, spoke to the horse, and said: "I don't know; habit, I guess, much as anything. I suppose underlying it all there's some magnet in it, some humiliating idea that I may catch sight of her again."

"Let's turn," said the doctor; "it gets suddenly cold these evenings, and I've got another patient or two coming to see me before sundown."

They turned; John spoke to the horse, and as they rolled softly on their rubber tires down the street they passed the Bathurst house. John

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didn't look toward it; he set his face as though it were an iron mask and never turned to right or left.

Bennett, when they got back to the house, went to bed in his old room and heard the trolley run till dawn along the familiar street. The following morning he opened the *Syracuse Times* in bed. It was noon; he had slept long and no one had disturbed him; the maid brought him his coffee and the papers when he at length rang his bell.

The *Times* fell from his hands. He sat there motionless, staring white and red, white and red, then he read the paragraph again.

Toward two o'clock Doctor Brainard came at length out of his cage, as John used to call it, and found his visitor marching up and down like a wild man, waiting for him; and Bennett took the doctor's arm.

"Did you read, did you see it in the *Times*, did you know?"

The doctor nodded. "Mr. Bathurst's been

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ill for two months; I was called in consultation there before you came."

"Why in thunder didn't you tell me so yesterday?"

The doctor made no reply.

Bennett, without noticing it, said: "Don't you see, don't you understand—she's free, she's free!"

"Have you had your coffee yet?" asked the doctor.

The young man resumed his walk up and down the drawing-room at large. When could he go to her—when could he see her? She was here, then, in Syracuse; he hadn't really known it, but he had heard she had gone abroad. He had tried not to hear, not to know, to be ignorant, to blot her out of existence for himself. He flung out his hands with a violent gesture and exclaimed: "And I haven't got a cent in the world!"

Doctor Brainard stood sturdily before the mantel. He looked practical and commonplace

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and businesslike, a little dried up, far from being a lover; he gazed thoughtfully at the young fellow launched so far on his sea of trouble, launched so far on that wonderful sea whose waters, because of death and fate, had been calmed for him many years. He didn't know whether he envied John or not, but he loved him.

"The woman's almost old enough to be his mother," he said to himself. "She's a brilliant, worldly creature; she's had a lot of admiration, and she'll have a lot more now. Why, there isn't the ghost of a chance for him. Still, women have been fools—fools before."

Doctor Brainard looked at the lover, this wreck of boyhood—its very destruction would touch her and she would know what he had been through for her. "Confound her," he said to himself, "but I'm going to risk it."

"Will you be quiet a second and stop walking up and down? I told you that when you found a good girl who would marry you I'd

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buy the ranch back and all that would start you fresh. Mrs. Bathurst, as a widow, is not in the conditions—still, that's your affair and hers. If you want to ask her to marry you, you can tell her that you own the ranch, and that you will be my heir. She's rich and probably won't care, but you're not a beggar."

John stared at him, and at the human kindness, at the benign sympathy, his own natural expression came back to his face. He grasped his friend's hand.

"You're a wonder, Doctor Brainard, a wonder."

When could he go, when would it be decent to go? Not for weeks, not for months. Where would she be then; would she leave? Well, he would follow her.

"Have you had your coffee, John?"

"Yes—yes."

"Well, let up now on this asylum walk of yours and come with me to the dining-room and have some more."

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The real greatness of his really great love carried him through the next few days so far apart from the common herd that Doctor Brainard wondered, was much impressed by him, and as he watched John, he was transfigured back into his own youth and to his own misery, and John grew dearer to him every day.

The real greatness of his love went with him to the funeral of the Honorable Peter Bathurst. Up in the gallery of the church, out of sight and unobserved, the light from the window back of him shining on his bare, glistening head, he stared down on the crowd, on the solemn procession, on the altar, on the coffin and on her. She was so still, so beautiful in her heavy weeds; her face was pale and quiet, and it made him ashamed even to think of love then, for she seemed a thing sacred by reason of her black garments and the solemn words that were being said.

But his love was stronger than any form

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and his love was real; whereas, he knew there could be no great sorrow in her heart, and it carried him over the hymns and the chants, and his human love spoke above the things in the prayer-book and over the few tears that were shed. He saw her stepsons and Mrs. Peter and Miss Cynthia Forsythe, Jack's fiancée, and he saw the little child, too, carried in, standing straight up in the pew, staring about; and as he looked on him, the words of the child's nursery rhyme came back quaintly to his mind:

“All the King's horses and all the King's men
Can never, never—”

and the old form and state had been utterly changed by death. These pictures passed before his excited eyes, and he then saw nothing more throughout but Virginia. And ardent, adoring, tender, he leaned over the gallery rail, gazing on the melancholy crowd as though a

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bright angel, winged with life and ecstasy, folded its pinions above death.

At the door Virginia went out between her stepsons, and Nicholas Pynne walked near her. But John's great love carried him even beyond this fact.

Doctor Brainard saw that he had no need to tell his ward to give himself time and to give her time. A fortnight passed and John never stirred from the house; he hardly slept or ate, but he didn't drink. The doctor did not know how many hours were spent in remorseful regret for the short roll in the mud, and that in the face of the vision he had had of Virginia Bathurst in the church, in the face of his hopes and his plans, his indulgences were a crime to him beyond forgiveness.

In a few days John's limit had been reached. The conventional wait of months was not to be expected of this lover. The family in general had gone to Tallahoe directly after the

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funeral, but the affairs of the estate called for Mrs. Bathurst's presence, and both the doctor and his ward knew that she had returned to town.

Before starting on his rounds one afternoon the doctor saw John come out of the house, stand for a moment on the step, looking up the street in a certain direction. He appeared taller, maturer, his face white and grave; he had the air of departure, the air of a man starting on a long journey. Doctor Brainard turned away as nervous and excited as though he were himself about to ask a woman to marry him.

On his own account, he was caring for a very important case and it kept him late, past his dinner-hour. When he returned, learning that his guest was in the house, he went up to the young man's room. He knocked, got no answer, and went in. An electric light from the street porch showed him the figure sitting in the window. At the doctor's entrance John

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rose and was the first to speak, in a voice all roughened at the edges, a voice almost like a boy's, so naïve it was in grief.

"Do you think I could get away anywhere?"

"To be sure. Want to go—abroad?"

"Yes."

Brainard mentally calculated.

"This is Monday—how would Saturday's boat do?"

"There's Wednesday's boat," John suggested.

"All right, my boy."

In the extremely vague light Doctor Brainard saw the blond head bend a little. Not a word of consolation came to his mind; he didn't try for any, knowing that in the war between words and feelings, words went to the wall.

"I'll go to the bank the first thing in the morning and fix you up a letter of credit." He waited a second, then said: "I'll fix it up for a year's expenses."

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The young man heard this through his misery. "I'll make it all right, Doctor, some day, if I—if I—"

"Come," said the Doctor, "come, John, buck up, my boy."

John returned to his place by the window and sat down again, thinking, his head on his arms.

"I'll go and tell Nelly to pack your things and your trunk."

The doctor stood there a moment in the half darkness, looking with compassion on the figure of the son of the woman he loved, and his own grief came back again. He mentally called up with distinctness the figure of Mary Poole as he turned away and went out, shutting the door behind him. And to the Bennett boy, as he sat there, sorrowing more pitifully than he had ever sorrowed over the loss of his home and his personal things, there came the figure of a woman now to stand behind him and to lay her shadowy fingers on his hair—it

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wasn't the same woman's fingers that had come in on his childish misery in the hall-room—it was a different woman that in the precarious light developed, and John Bennett, unconscious of her ghostly presence, leaned against her shadow as one whom his mother comforted.

CHAPTER XXIV,

A RARE THING

THE following autumn, Doctor Brainard, dozing on the porch under the honeysuckle vines at Home Farm, awakened with a consciousness that his delicious nap had been spoiled. A clear voice came from the roadway to his hired man: "Do you know whether Mr. Bennett has come yet? But I thought he was to arrive to-day?"

The doctor stirred his drowsy limbs, got up and went toward the stable. The visit thereafter was always connected in his mind with the smell of honeysuckle and with the stirring of the southwest wind in the brilliant maple leaves.

"Oh, how d'do, Doctor Brainard?"

A smart dog-cart had drawn up by the stable door; there was an English groom in the back

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and two ladies in front. Doctor Brainard recognized the trap as belonging to Mrs. Nicholas Pynne, whom he greeted cordially, but the young lady was a stranger, a much younger woman than the owner of the dog-cart. Dark and graceful she sat up well beside Mrs. Nicholas Pynne. She closed her parasol and held it, leaning on it with her white-gloved hands, and looked pleasantly at the old gentleman from eyes blue as Irish lakes.

"This is Doctor Brainard?" She seemed to know him. "I've heard a lot about you from a mutual friend." She gave him her hand with an attractive smile. "We thought—I thought that Mr. Bennett would be here by this time. When he left us yesterday at the steamer he said he was coming directly to you, so I've driven over to ask him if he won't ride to-morrow."

She monopolized the conversation in her clear, bright voice. There was no pronoun in it but the first person singular. Her com-

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panion, completely out of the moment's interest, fixed her eyes on the level sweep of the autumn fields.

When Mrs. Pynne had introduced Miss Haven to the doctor, he exclaimed: "Oh, of *course*," and remembered that "he knew the name from John's letters very well indeed!"

"We are going to be neighbors, Doctor Brainard," Miss Haven informed him, "for my father has taken the Point Setter Place for a year."

"Ah, yes, that will be perfectly delightful; it's a fine old property. John will be home to-night."

After Mrs. Pynne had exchanged a few words with her old acquaintance and said how very sorry she was not to see John Bennett—she was going to Newport that night—the younger lady leaned out of the dog-cart, interested in the low house with its vines, where, through one open window, she could see

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the piano, and she looked past the house and the garden and over the slope.

"Is that the spring-house, Doctor Brainard?" she asked. "And is that the brook down there?"

"Bless my soul, yes—you know Home Farm?"

She seemed to know it intimately to judge by the expression, which almost said to him: "Dear me, how stupid you are; don't you *know* it has become to me a sort of sentimental playground already?"

Doctor Brainard said to himself: "My word, I bet they're engaged!"

When the smart trap with the two smart ladies had finally driven away, he walked down to the gate waiting for John, and presently he opened it to let the buggy pass through when it went to the station to fetch the home-comer.

Then Brainard clicked the gate to and leaned there, looking toward the town, where not

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more than three miles away the Point Setter Place had been let to the Havens.

"They're not unlike," he mused, "those two women; the same build, the same type, and I've always thought that a man always loves a certain type of woman. I guess I didn't do far wrong when I bought back the ranch from Furniss."

Delighted, humorous over the situation, he affirmed at the end of his little meditation, nodding briskly: "*I guess* that's the girl."

After supper that night, when the returned traveler had lighted his English brierwood pipe, discoursed on its merits, polished it up with the palm of his hand, forced the doctor to weigh it and smell it and admire it, it was not until they both sat in the doorway, smoking under the honeysuckle vine that Doctor Brainard said:

"Miss Haven rode over from the Point Setter Place to ask for you. It seems they've rented that property."

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The adopted son took his pipe out of his mouth, smiled at it rapturously, and said:

"Gosh, isn't she a beauty!"

"She is a very handsome woman, indeed."

"I meant the pipe." John rubbed it on his sleeve until it shone.

"She seems to have a lot of spirit and charm, too," the doctor continued.

Then his companion asked: "Did she drive over here alone?"

"A groom came with her," replied Doctor Brainard, and before he could pursue any further hypocrisy, the young man remarked:

"It's a very rare thing, isn't it, Doctor, that a man marries his first love?"

And the doctor agreed that it was very rare indeed, thinking to himself: "By George, the boy's going back to his old theme!"

"Milly Haven," said John meditatively, "was my first love."

CHAPTER XXV

THE SPELL BROKEN

SIX years later he returned to Syracuse and in the springtide.

Doctor Brainard had died suddenly and among the bits of property left to him alongside of the doctor's fortune, John Bennett came into possession of the old James Street house, his old home.

He stood, toward four o'clock one afternoon, in the window of the empty dwelling. There were no household goods belonging to other people to disturb him with strange memories or to suggest anything but his own people. He could see the lawns, green with the young growth of spring; the grass sown with gay dandelion heads. The brick path to the gate sagged, was broken up, weeds grew over it; but even in disuse and the ravages of

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time, the atmosphere of familiar things came back and met him here at home.

Standing in the bare window in the bare room, far away now from any other household and from any other treasures, John let himself think back. It was the very first time that he had given himself any such mental holiday.

It was as plain to him as yesterday how he had stood in that very window on the day of the auction and longed and yearned for the one possession that meant his father to him; how he had suffered there, a wretched, lonely, little boy, and how *some one* had come and helped him through!

He was past thirty now, a young man still, but he had matured and deepened as the years sounded new depths in his loving, rich nature, and as home life, husband-hood and father-hood opened the springs of his heart.

But this return to old things and old places leveled like magic the distance between the

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little boy and the man, and, like his child self on the auction day, John felt and acknowledged that there was always in his heart a yearning and a loneliness, and that indefinable something which nothing had ever quite answered.

As he so stood, reflecting, turning his mental and spiritual state over in his mind, he was waiting for the builder with whom he had a rendezvous, who was to come and make plans for the new town house which he intended putting up here in Syracuse, where he should some day come and live.

The solitude of the rooms oppressed him like an audible demand on him; they stretched away, empty, untenanted. He was going to change them all, the people whom he would bring here to live had never known his boyhood's memories or any of his old life, and he didn't care that they should. He had been desolate here and he was desolate now, as he gazed out on the sunny lawn, at the road,

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and at the spring sunlight filling the town streets.

It was the inevitable isolation of soul, the solitude of being, the yearning of a man young, full of desire, very ardent and keen, for the ideal—for the completion of an idea he had never been entirely able to bring to its proper satisfaction.

As he bravely allowed himself to understand this fact, a pang hurt him like a physical thing, his heart swelled within him. The associations around him had taken him back nearly twenty years, and the childhood agony that had shaken him here was no more real than that which swayed him now, and he wanted—wanted—to *see her again*. He permitted himself to confess the fact and that anger, revolt, blame, and reproach had long ago died, in his memories of her—he forgot that he had ever thought her a cruel, heartless coquette who had played with a man's heart and soul, he forgot everything excepting that she had been to him the

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one perfect woman and that he wanted to see her once more.

In these years, happy years, calm, successful, and harmonious, nothing had disturbed his content. The new love which he had violently and desperately taken into his life crushed out the old. But here, in his native town, her memory came to tell him that he could never be happy or at peace unless he saw her. And that should he see her and love her again, and find that he had never ceased to do so, his happiness was doomed. Nothing but her hands could close the doors between them—or open on the gardens of his old self and his first great passion a promise of something from her still—the fulfilment to him of the promises she had never kept.

A motor, driven by a man in livery, puffed up, stopped at his gate, and a lady got out of the car and came up the sagging brick path where the weeds had grown. He knew that it was Mrs. Nicholas Pynne—his heart beat

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like an engine in his breast and he did not move, but waited as he was until she came up the steps and her foot fell on the porch. He had not seen her since, in the drawing-room of her own house here in Syracuse, he had asked her to marry him and she had told him she was engaged to Nicholas Pynne. She came in without ringing or knocking, for the door stood wide open, and before he could decide whether to run or stand fast, he knew without seeing her that she had come into the room and was standing before him. He never remembered whether or not he greeted her; he had a vague feeling that as she came their hearts and senses and minds blent in a mystical union.

"I saw you at poor Doctor Brainard's funeral last week, John. I was hoping we would meet before you went West! . . . It's awfully nice to see you again, John; I've had your news from the boys. And how dear of you to telephone me, as you did just

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now from the old house, and how splendid that you're going to live here in Syracuse some day."

He had not looked at her, with every word she said, his heart, like a thing to be tortured and sacrificed, was being led back into the foolish, dreadful, wonderful, beautiful, and agonizing past. He thought doggedly:

"There's nothing in her voice that's going to break the spell—there's no hope or help there."

He had been a fool to send for her!

Mrs. Pyrrne laughed softly, and that sound was another pang, musical, humorous, and sweet.

"Are you blind, John? Have you lost your eyesight?"

For six years he had been reading the book of young beauty, and he had learned his lesson with great affection and sincere love. He had become a connoisseur of bloom, of soft youthful lines, slenderness and grace, of eyes fresh

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and blue as Irish lakes, of raven hair, glossy, untouched by a white thread.

He put his hand out frankly and said without any perceptible effort: "It was awfully good of you to come like this, Mrs. Pynne—but you were always good to me."

"I've been far better to you than you ever knew," she couldn't help saying; she didn't tell him that she knew he found her changed. But his frankness, his sudden ease, his look of evident emancipation! Oh, heavens! Virginia Bathurst had thought she knew what the keen pang was; she had thought when he left her that day in Syracuse, six years ago, that she could never suffer again. She saw now that she had been wrong.

"You're going to make a lot of changes here, aren't you? You're going to rebuild?"

The proprietor looked around the bare rooms with sudden interest.

"Yes, it's a little too small for the family as it is now, you know."

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She nodded sympathetically.

"See," he indicated through the window, "there comes the architect, confound him, and who's that with him?"

"My husband."

They faced each other in the dismantled room. Then John Bennett, mentally and spiritually set free by the sight of her, yet finding her wonderfully dear and knowing that he should always love her much, said warmly:

"I've never dreamed what a splendid friend you are until now. Do you know, I've cursed you all my life for making me suffer, but I understand that you meant something else by what you did, and though," he added with tenderness, "I couldn't imagine a greater happiness than to have been your husband, still I know that when you were cruel to me you did not really mean to make me grieve."

The lady before him rested her dark eyes, grave and beautiful, on John; her smile was adorable, she was lovely as the late rose is

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lovely as it lays its full-blown beauty against a patch of autumn sunlight on the wall before it withers and its petals fall. She put her hand on his shoulder and it reposed there like snow on the dark cloth.

"Your wife owes me a great deal," Mrs. Pynne said, "although I don't suppose she knows it, for you were a very determined lover, John."

His heart began to beat again.

"You taught me how to love," he said.

Still thinking how charming and wonderful she had been, how more charming and more wonderful she was now, putting as she did her master touch to it all by setting him free, by leaving his mind and imagination free to love his wife, whom until this moment he had never really been free to love with all his power—for he had been haunted, tempted, assailed with his image of Virginia Bathurst—still thinking that he was grateful to her, he said:

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"I have been mad enough to think more than once of that last night in Bathurst House and what you promised me then." He flushed as he spoke. "Of course, you don't remember, but you said—"

She interrupted him. "I said I would give you all."

He nodded. "I built my life on that."

A shadow crossed her face and she answered hesitatingly: "I can't see why you should recall this now."

And he replied, having grown in his emancipation suddenly very wise and very clever:

"I see to-day for the first time that when you said that, you meant something else. You meant then that you would give me just what I have to-day. I mean to say—Milly and the kids."

The lady forced herself to smile.

"You're a very clever man, John."

And he exclaimed, delighted at his wisdom:

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"Well, I've just thought it all out now; and you were a wonder, a wonder."

She laughed gently. "So were you, John, so were you."

The light poured full from the window on her now, revealing her plainly. She knew perfectly well, as every beautiful woman knows well, that her hair was marked with gray and that her bloom was faded. She stood fearlessly in the garish, pitiless light. It had shone on her twenty years ago as she stood there in the fresh bloom of her beauty and it shone on her now. Her hand was still on his shoulder, and John covered it with both of his. Something in her laugh brought back for a moment his old despair.

"Oh," he said with a long breath, "do you know that I went through hell for you? If you had cared for me even a little bit, no matter what you thought you ought to have done, you couldn't have treated me as you did.

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It must have helped you splendidly not to care."

She said: "Well, you don't seem to have quite forgiven me, John." And to herself: "I didn't suppose I would have to go through just this again. . . ."

And he replied slowly: "Oh, yes, I have forgiven; but it's a very fresh forgiveness. I've only just forgiven you this day."

In spite of herself, she breathed: "And you speak of cruelty!"

But she smiled as she said the words, and half humorously, half tenderly, hearing the steps of the two men on the porch, John said:

"Do you know that you owe me many, many—"

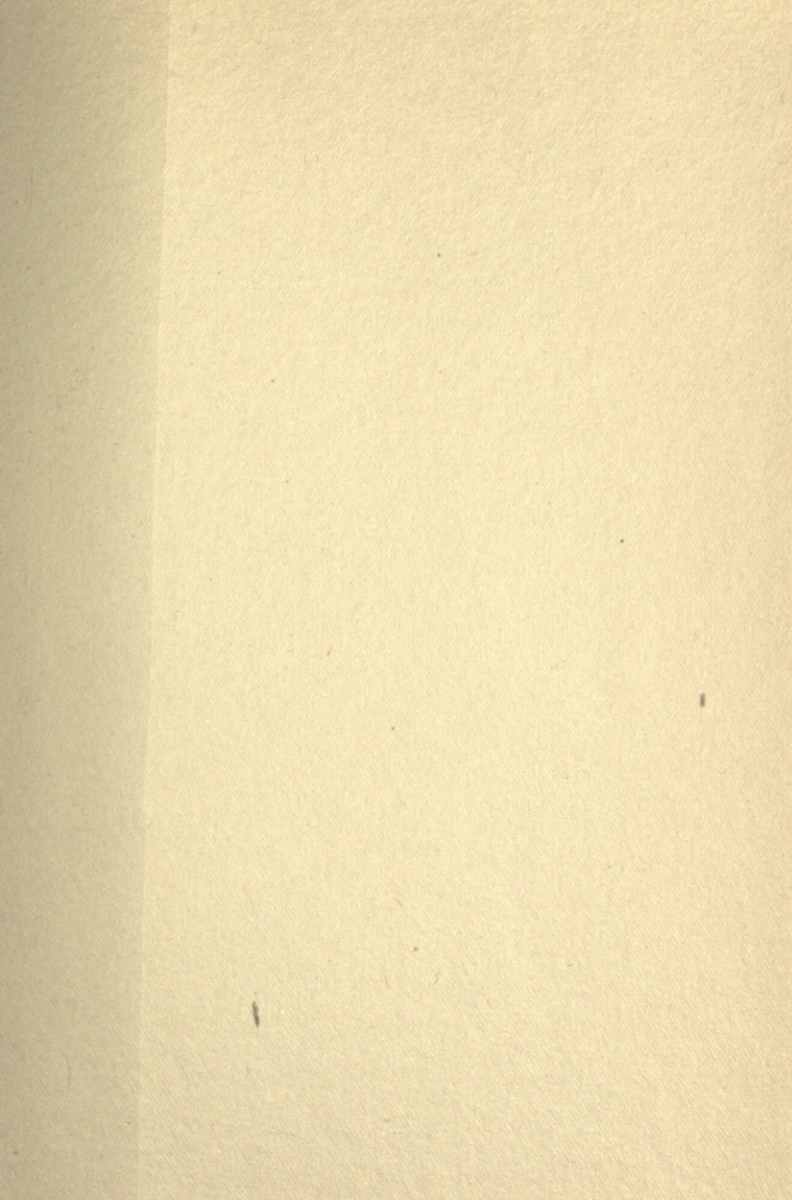
And he didn't finish, for Mrs. Pynne bent toward him. She blushed, she didn't kiss him, but for a second her fragrant cheek lay against his lips, as the full blown rose lays its beauty to the sun—and then, as they stood apart, Nicholas Pynne and the architect came in

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together. And in the next five seconds, after he had greeted the two gentlemen, John Bennett, with a great show of interest, was indicating to Mr. Pynne and the builder where he wanted the front window to be cut out and transformed into a bow.

THE END











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